

Forest Service workers sound alarms about trails

Idaho workers concerned about short staffing

By NOAH FISHMAN Express Staff Writer Dec 31, 2025 3



Union representatives for U.S. Forest Service workers in the Sawtooth and Salmon-Challis national forests are echoing some conclusions stated in an [internal Forest Service](#) trails report recently obtained and published by The Washington Post describing widespread public and employee dissatisfaction with trails on federally-managed public lands.

The internal report, published on Tuesday, Dec. 16, stated that services and public satisfaction in national forests across the U.S. will “continue to decline in 2026 and beyond without direction to prioritize investments in recreation generally and the trails program specifically.”

The report also stated that some districts across the country have lost up to 100% of their trails staff and “hundreds of years of trail expertise.” It stated that Forest Service staff are experiencing stress and burnout.

In late [2024](#), the Forest Service announced that it would lay off its entire seasonal, nonfirefighter workforce for the upcoming fiscal year due to budget constraints.

In February 2025, the Trump administration fired thousands of federal workers, including 139 Forest Service employees in Idaho. Of those, 35 were fired from the Sawtooth National Forest and 20 from the Salmon-Challis National Forest, the Express previously reported.

While the report did not specifically point to the February firings as the cause for employee and public grievances, Adam Larson, a permanent seasonal

Trails Program team lead for the McCall and New Meadows ranger districts in Idaho, did. He said his department only has three people left, and he is the only person responsible for maintaining 600 miles of trails.

"It's not possible," said Larson, who is also the president of the National Federation of Federal Employees Local 1753, the union that represents Sawtooth National Forest and Salmon-Challis National Forest employees.

He explained that in a regular season he would have five or six temporary workers, including assistance from the Montana Conservation Corps during the summer. Larson said Forest Service workers are not expendable and their skills are not easily replaced.

"I like to joke all the time that my job is just smashing rocks into smaller rocks, but it really is a craft and it does take years to hone that craft," he said. "We really are trades people; these are people that are dedicated to their craft, and that goes a long way."

Forest Service spokespeople did not respond by press time to questions about whether the Salmon-Challis and Sawtooth national forests were experiencing the operational gaps and decreases in trail maintenance described in the recent report.

Blaine County-area nonprofits have stepped in to help fill gaps in trails staffing, the Express previously reported.

In March, a judge ordered the reinstatement of workers fired from the Forest Service and other agencies, though the number of workers reinstated remained unclear as of press time.

Brad LaPlante, organizing chair of the NFFE local 1753, told the Express that 48 Sawtooth National Forest employees had taken part in the Trump administration's Deferred Resignation Program, voluntary early retirement or quit since February.

LaPlante also said that out of 174 current Sawtooth National Forest employees, only three work on the Trails Program. LaPlante said he was aware of some trail employees needing to focus on some trails over others due to workforce constraints, specifically in Stanley.

"There's a skeleton crew basically working across the forest," said LaPlante. "What they've generally done now is picked and chosen certain trails, probably the ones that the public visits the most."

LaPlante said he believed that the trails department in the Stanley area had dropped from around seven or eight people to just two or three people but did not have the exact numbers.

"We were already kind of low-staffed to begin with prior to the new administration and leadership change because we already had quite a lot of vacancies," said LaPlante. "You get a lot of people in and out, the retention rates weren't too high."

Larson agreed. He said that these programs have been understaffed for decades and that the public should get more involved.

"If people do give a s--- about their public lands, we really do need to be protecting them and standing up for them and fighting for them, especially now more than ever," said Larson.

The U.S. trails report also outlined operational gaps, including millions of unspent grant dollars being returned due to vacancies and a lack of temporary workers, the abandonment of backcountry trails in many districts and increased trail compliance issues. These issues were said to have caused a 22% decrease in trail miles maintained, a 19% decrease in trail miles meeting Forest Service standards and the "lowest accomplishments in 15 years."

Also included in the status report were anonymous testimonies from Forest Service workers.

"We lost 200 years of trail experience this year," said one worker.

Another employee stated that though the summer seemed manageable, maintenance tasks like drainage and brushing were not completed.

"The cumulative effects will be worse and worse," the employee said. "Then we'll have a huge backlog, even worse than what it was before."

"I heavily lean toward quitting and reinvention if we go another summer without seasonals," said another anonymous worker. "It feels like we are on the verge of not passing anything on for the future, and that feels like 24 years of trails and wilderness work rolling back to the bottom of the hill."

The report concluded with a summary of "immediate needs," which included externally-funded temporary seasonal hiring, increased grant and agreement funding, clearer communication from leadership, restoring "direct hire authority" to Youth Conservation Corps programs, investing in staff trainings and greater maintenance support for a mobile app that trail workers use to monitor and report trail data

