

A ban on chainsaws in wilderness is performative, not practical

An experienced trail crew leader argues that, in today's forests, the rigidity of the regulation buries what it's designed to protect.

Claire K. Thompson July 28, 2026

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Claire Thompson works to clear Chikamin Tie, a fire-impacted non-wilderness trail in Washington's Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, by chainsaw. The trail is currently burning again in the Little Giant Fire.

Xander Demetrios

As we sawed through yet another fire-scarred fir that had fallen across a backcountry trail, my trail crew and I would sometimes hear a hiker, pause our work and brace for the inevitable question: "What, they don't let you use chainsaws?"

Nope, we'd answer. In a federally designated wilderness area, no motorized equipment is allowed. That's why, we'd explain, we cleared trails with a crosscut saw, the same wooden-handled tool you see in old black-and-white photos of loggers.

To most people, "wilderness" is in the heart of the beholder: an abstract term for any wild or remote-feeling area. But when it comes to our federal public lands, wilderness is a proper noun, defined by the [1964 Wilderness Act](#). A designated wilderness area consists of 5,000 or more contiguous roadless acres that meet special criteria, including "opportunities for solitude" and "unconfined recreation" and a lack of "permanent

improvements.” The law protects these areas from development and regulates activities there more tightly than on other public lands.

Earlier this spring, the U.S. Forest Service [allowed the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association to use chainsaws](#) to clear a limited number of trails in Idaho’s Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Some wilderness advocates panicked, warning this would lead to the erosion of wilderness protections; some accused the agency of bowing to special-interest groups.

But the trail workers I know — skilled professionals who have spent years clearing logs and brush from trails and who deal firsthand with the devastating impacts of climate change and federal budget cuts on trail stewardship — have long sought greater flexibility on chainsaws in wilderness. Yet their voices remain largely absent from the conversation.



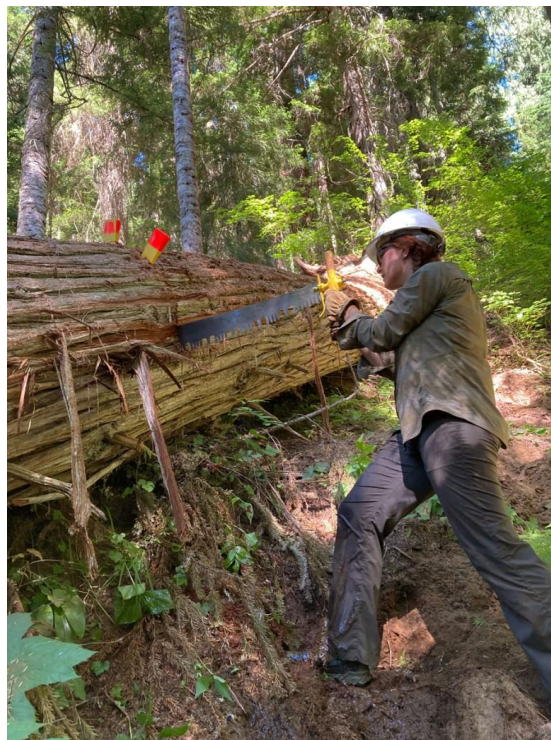
At the Monument Creek Trailhead just outside Pasayten Wilderness in the North Cascades, Washington, a sign reminds visitors of Forest Service chainsaw regulations. **Claire Thompson**

I spent eight years working on trail crews in Washington's fire-prone and heavily timbered Cascade Range, primarily clearing downed logs from trails. My ranger district on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest encompassed over 700 miles of trail, about half of them in designated wilderness. I cut thousands of logs, using crosscut saws on wilderness trails and chainsaws elsewhere.

After a wildfire — and there are more fires each year in the West — a single mile of trail can be blocked by scores, even hundreds, of downed, dead trees. And trees will keep falling for years, even decades, to come. Other climate-fueled phenomena, including widespread beetle infestations, wetter, heavier snows and extreme winds, contribute to the buildup of deadfall. Each season, with an average of four or five people on the trail crew and dozens of volunteers, we were lucky to clear about half of our district's trail mileage. Districts with smaller crews, or none at all, cleared far less.

Unsafe and impassable trails are not just inconvenient; they hinder backcountry evacuations, fire management and scientific monitoring. They also limit public access to wilderness, stifling the growth of a diverse community of wilderness lovers and defenders — something we need now more than ever.

Trail workers care about keeping public lands accessible. That's our core purpose, after all. The Wilderness Act requires the government to administer wilderness "for the use and enjoyment of the American people" — a phrase that appears three times in the law's text. But it's hard to enjoy what you can't experience. And, to paraphrase David Attenborough, people are unlikely to care about protecting what they've never experienced.



The author clears an old-growth cedar with a crosscut saw on Boulder Pass Trail in the Glacier Peak Wilderness, Washington. **Xander Demetrios**

I took pride in my skill as a sawyer, relishing the rhythm and camaraderie of pulling a crosscut with a partner. But log after log, year after year, the work took its toll on my body and morale, and I came to question the agency's no-exceptions ban on chainsaws in wilderness. A single cut with a chainsaw takes seconds. The same cut can take minutes, even hours, with a crosscut saw, increasing sawyers' exposure to hazards like standing dead snags. In today's forests, with today's staffing, prohibiting chainsaws is merely performative; instead of protecting wilderness, we're helping it disappear.

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Maintaining wilderness access demands both bigger, better-paid trail crews *and* the targeted use of chainsaws. It's worth noting that the word "chainsaw" does not appear in the Wilderness Act; Section 4(c) simply prohibits the use of "motorized equipment" in wilderness areas "except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area." The National Park Service, which has long considered clearing trails to be a minimum requirement, allows its wilderness trail crews to use chainsaws. The buildup of deadfall now obliterating wilderness trails in national forests demands that the Forest Service do the same.

Even if every ranger district in the West were fully staffed next year, trees would still fall, fires would burn, and crews would keep playing a hopeless game of catch-up. Chainsaws could help make the workload manageable again.

When I started working for the Forest Service in 2016, our district crew had already stopped maintaining over a dozen minor wilderness trails. Ten years later, they're struggling to keep open major trails that provide the only remaining access to entire backcountry zones as well as to key sections of through-routes like the Pacific Crest Trail. Abandoning these trails would mean further concentrating people in high-profile places like the Enchantments or busy national parks like Mount Rainier — areas already suffering from overuse.

In the Frank Church — the focus of the latest debate about chainsaws in wilderness — dozens of airstrips and private ranches predating the Wilderness Act welcome fly-in guests. Trails provide a far more equitable and affordable access to wilderness, if we can keep them.

Today's battery-powered saws provide a viable, quieter alternative to gas-powered chainsaws. Hikers have told me it's rare to encounter a trail crew at all, making the odds of even hearing a chainsaw still lower. The only noticeable impact of allowing chainsaws in wilderness would be more miles of safe and passable trails — creating more opportunities for people to experience, enjoy and ultimately protect the wilderness.

Claire K. Thompson

Claire K. Thompson, a former seasonal trail worker with the U.S. Forest Service, is working on a book about the impacts of climate and political change on public-lands stewardship. She writes from north-central Washington.