



A CASE FOR BOLD INVESTMENT IN THE FOREST SERVICE

The Forest Service has been underfunded and understaffed for decades, hampering its ability to meet even the most basic tenets of its mission, much less the needs of a 21st century America. Visionary action – and investment – is needed to ensure that our National Forests live up to their potential to support rural communities and the economy, create jobs, address the climate crisis, and provide recreation opportunities and access.

Our organizations have a unique perspective on how Forest Service staffing and funding shortfalls have affected outdoor recreation, public access, and preservation of wild places and biodiversity. A hollowed out career workforce has left the Forest Service hamstrung in its ability to keep up with current management demands, let alone proactively respond to climate impacts and growing outdoor recreation. Moreover, without more agency capacity, our country will be unable to deliver on the promise of the Great American Outdoors Act or other targeted public lands investments.

Having experienced the effects of agency constraints first-hand, we know that a bold investment in the Forest Service is necessary. With additional capacity, the Forest Service will be able to meet the challenges of our time and create jobs in struggling rural communities, strengthen our forests against a changing climate, and increase public access. To meet this moment, Congress must invest in a substantial increase in the agency's annual discretionary appropriations.

Background

Since at least the early 1990s, the Forest Service has undergone a significant reduction in staffing across all programs at all levels of the agency except wildland firefighting. For example, since 1992, there has been a 27% reduction in fisheries biologists, a 38% reduction in wildlife biologists, and a 49% reduction in forestry technicians (a category that includes seasonal trail crew members) across the agency.¹ Budget constraints have also reduced staffing for restoration, watershed, and recreation by nearly 40%, from about 18,000 in 1998 to fewer than 11,000 people in 2015.² Over the past 30 years, there have also been many forest and district mergers as the Forest Service seeks to do more with less. Meanwhile, visitation to Forest Service lands increases by an average of more than 800,000 visits per year.³

¹ National Association of Forest Service Retirees. *Sustaining the Forest Service: Increasing Workforce Capacity to increase the pace and scale of restoration on national forest system lands*. July 2019. Available at <https://www.nafsr.org/advocacy/2019/072619%20Workforce%20Capacity%20Study.pdf>

² <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2015/11/10/forest-service-report-highlights-restoration-progress-made-despite>

³ U.S. Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey Results National Summary Report 2018, available online at https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/5082018_national_summary_report_070219.pdf

In general, these staffing reductions have led to half as many staff tasked with twice as much responsibility, a backlog of work, frustrated partners and stakeholders, and an inability for the agency to fully meet its mission and the expectations of the American public. Agency morale has suffered as well. The Forest Service was once considered among the best federal agencies in which to work, but it is now one of the least popular agencies.⁴ A demoralized workforce does not lend itself to high productivity or customer satisfaction.

While the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) provides much-needed funding for Forest Service deferred maintenance needs, the Forest Service does not currently have adequate staff necessary to administer GAOA deferred maintenance and Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) projects. Moreover, GAOA funding only addresses a fraction of the Forest Service's deferred maintenance needs.

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of public land under a multiple-use mandate. This is a herculean task even without considering the mind boggling ecological and geographic diversity of these lands. As organizations that frequently partner with the Forest Service, we see and value the role of partners, but partnerships are no substitute for true agency capacity. Likewise, private contractors are not a substitute for agency capacity.

The Forest Service has managed to do more with less, manage by triage, and patch together grants and partnerships to meet its most pressing demands, but it is struggling. Visionary action – and investment – is needed to restore the Agency and the public's confidence and trust in it, and ensure that our National Forests live up to their potential to support rural communities and the economy, address the climate crisis, and provide recreation opportunities and access.

Congress must increase appropriations for the Forest Service as an investment in our public lands and the communities who value them.

Supporting Rural Communities

The Forest Service must adapt and grow in order to respond to a changing America. Forest products, grazing, and other extractive industries that once drove rural economies—and helped to fill forest coffers—are on the decline, while outdoor recreation is booming. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 2.1% (\$459.8 billion) of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019.⁵ This is roughly equal to the percentage of GDP (2%) accounted for by forest products, including revenues from private forests, in 2019.⁶

Rural communities' struggle since the recession with population loss, job loss, and growing economic distress have been well-documented.⁷ However, counties with outdoor recreation economies are more likely to attract new residents with greater wealth and have faster-growing wages than their non-

⁴ <https://www.fseee.org/2018/12/20/job-satisfaction-drops-among-forest-service-employees/>

⁵ <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

⁶ <https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=150&step=2&isuri=1&categories=gdpind>

⁷ Headwaters Economics. *Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes*. (2019, January). Retrieved March 1, 2021.

recreation counterparts. These trends are particularly true in rural communities.⁸ As rural communities invest in recreation as an economic development strategy, they also rely on the quality, availability, and access to outdoor recreation opportunities and rely on the capabilities of the agencies that are charged with the management of outdoor recreation resources.

Since 1977, the number of recreation visitor days on national forest trails has increased 376 percent.⁹ Although visitation was trending upwards prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented visitation—and stress—to National Forest lands. For example, Hyalite Canyon on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, the most popular Forest Service recreation area in Region 1, has seen, on average, a 42% increase in visitation since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In Hyalite, as across the Forest Service system, this increase in visitation has brought trail conflicts, increased litter, and illegal parking, camping, and dumping. These impacts, in turn, affect the public's experience, biodiversity, water quality, and Forest Service staff safety.

Many other Forest Service lands, especially those in closer proximity to major urban centers, experienced even more visitation, with even more impacts, but with the same or less Forest Service management capacity. For example, hiker use of popular trails along the I-90 corridor outside Seattle was 50-55% higher in 2020 compared to 2019. The ranger district managed this increased use with fewer resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some toilets were locked in order to keep up with orderly maintenance. Due to a suspension of the volunteer program, about 13,000 volunteer hours in support of frontcountry and wilderness education and maintenance work was not conducted. Lack of available campground hosts closed a popular campground.¹¹

Once the pandemic is under control, outdoor recreation on National Forest lands is not likely to noticeably decline. As many have noted, the pandemic simply pushed things ahead to a point we did not think we'd reach for another 5-10 years. Just as the Forest Service grew its wildland fire program in response to an increase in the scope and scale of wildland fires, the agency must grow its recreation program to respond to the challenges and opportunities that come with increases in outdoor recreation. The public should not be discouraged from visiting and enjoying their public lands, but the Forest Service must act to proactively manage use so that recreation is sustainable and resources are protected. The Forest Service must adequately steward public resources and be a good neighbor to rural communities.

⁸ Lawson, M. (2020, February 28). *How Outdoor Recreation Supports Rural Economic Development*. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/outdoor-recreation/>

⁹ Headwaters Economics. *Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes*. (2019, January). Retrieved March 1, 2021.

USDA Forest Service. Fiscal Year 2013 President's Budget

¹⁰ Comparing 2019-2020 road counter data, collected by Friends of Hyalite, a local non-profit Forest Service partner.

¹¹ Data from Alex Weinberg, I-90 Corridor Manager, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Snoqualmie Ranger District

Creating Jobs

As previously noted, the outdoor recreation economy comprises a significant portion of the national GDP. From backpacking to backcountry skiing, summer camps to hunting camps, Forest Service lands play host to a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities and support many outdoor recreation-focused businesses. And outdoor recreation brings important dollars into the Forest Service. According to Headwaters Economics, in 2017 outdoor recreation use generated significantly more in gross receipts than any other commercial activity on Forest Service lands.¹² Outdoor recreation and tourism are the single greatest source of jobs on the National Forest System.¹³ However, permitting backlogs and a lack of proactive planning to identify where and how to manage different recreation activities hinder economic opportunities related to outdoor recreation on National Forest lands. Furthermore, better planning is needed to ensure that important recreation places are not degraded by forest management actions and that outdoor recreation does not harm ecologically sensitive areas or reduce biodiversity. Planning takes people, and the Forest Service needs more people to do the planning—and permitting, monitoring, education, and management—to better support and encourage outdoor recreation and the outdoor recreation economy.

Due to dwindling resources and staffing, the Forest Service has increasingly relied on partner organizations, such as Outdoor Alliance’s member groups. We are committed to caring for our public lands, but organizations like ours rely on Forest Service staff and resources to execute our stewardship and maintenance work. In order for community organizations to effectively work on National Forest lands, there must be adequate staffing within the Forest Service and sufficient budgets to facilitate the on-the-ground efforts of volunteers. From expertise on federal regulations and management policies to supportive services like the pack stock program and sawyer certification, federal employees are vital to the success of volunteer work on public lands. Caring for public lands should not primarily fall to partner organizations. We are best suited to support a well-resourced Forest Service, as assistants to professional trail crews and resource managers.

The impacts of chronic underfunding ripple into rural communities and small businesses. Lack of staffing and resources to address basic operations and maintenance like rebuilding a bridge or opening a campground means that people soon may no longer be able to visit a favorite trail or lake. Without their visit, they will not stop for a meal at a local mom-and-pop burger joint or pick up a souvenir at a shop in many rural towns near national forests. Guides and outfitters are another example of small, often rural, businesses that are hindered by lack of staffing for permit administration. For example, a kayaking business in Oregon was on the waiting list for 12 years to obtain a special use permit to provide guided trips and instruction for kayakers; ultimately it was easier to take kayakers on guided trips to Costa Rica than to the Mt. Hood National Forest in the business’s own backyard.

In many communities, federal jobs are among the best employment opportunities available, paying more than other local job prospects. The Forest Service needs workers at every level, from seasonal positions to career-level hires, and Forest Service jobs provide good pay and benefits. More Forest

¹² <https://headwaterseconomics.org/dataviz/national-forests-gross-receipts/>

¹³ Testimony of Lenise Lago, Associate Chief, USDA Forest Service, before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on Infrastructure on National Forest System Lands, June 18, 2019. <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/9D5D526C-2337-4002-9072-285BE733E072>

Service jobs means more economic opportunity for people and communities. Whether it's a young person working their first job on a Forest Service trail crew, earning money to pay for college while also reaping all the benefits that come from a strenuous summer in the outdoors, a middle-aged parent looking for an administrative job to support their family, or a recent graduate looking to apply their scientific degree in a non-academic setting, Forest Service careers can provide a multitude of opportunities, but only if the agency is hiring.

Investing in the Forest Service to expand capacity is good for the economy. Not only is the outdoor recreation economy important nationwide, research shows that counties with recreation economies attract new residents and income and experience higher income and job growth than non-recreation counties.¹⁴ "Recreation counties" are significantly correlated with a larger share of public land and protected public land. But without more capacity, the Forest Service cannot meet the needs of those who depend upon the agency to permit the businesses that take people onto National Forest lands; it cannot maintain the trails, campgrounds, picnic areas, and other infrastructure that supports recreation; and it cannot monitor, enforce, and educate as needed to ensure that recreation is sustainably managed across the National Forest system.

Increasing Forest Service workforce capacity will help the agency to better capitalize on public/private partnerships and leverage existing resources. A substantial labor force already exists in the form of NGOs with acting federal, county, and state partnerships in place. Resources to these entities can quickly be put to work to create jobs and benefit local economies, but not without a well-resourced agency to plan for and oversee these efforts. In addition to investing in the health of public lands, waters, and climate, this work will create long-term benefits for communities through bolstering the outdoor recreation economy, worker and employer attraction, and quality of life and well-being.

Access to Public Lands

Access to and enjoyment of public lands is a right that should be afforded to everyone in America, but many barriers exist to this access. Many people do not feel safe or welcome on public lands today because of a long history of disenfranchisement, prejudice, and outright danger. Indeed, research shows that the Forest Service is failing to serve the full spectrum of the American public, fostering inequity across the National Forest system.¹⁵ Through Forest Planning, some forests have begun to identify ways to make Forest Service lands more welcoming to diverse populations, such as identifying a need for more group picnic sites or accessible trails, but oftentimes forests lack the capacity to achieve even these modest goals in a timely manner.

Likewise, the Forest Service has many rules and guidelines for processes that can make national forests more welcoming for diverse populations, but the agency lacks the capacity to do the planning to implement these policies. For example, winter travel management planning is an excellent opportunity to re-envision how National Forests can meet the needs of the recreating public in winter, including providing safe and accessible opportunities for snow play, but to date only seven National Forests have embarked on winter travel planning since the Over-Snow Vehicle Rule was enacted in 2015, and of

¹⁴ <https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/recreation-counties-attract-report.pdf>

¹⁵ Flores et al. 2018. *Recreation Equity: Is the Forest Service serving it's diverse publics?* Journal of Forestry. 116(3): 266-272. Available online at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treearch/pubs/56144>

those, only one (the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit) is even considering a holistic approach that goes beyond simply designating areas and trails for over-snow vehicle use.

Inadequate Forest Service staff capacity to process outfitter-guide permits is another barrier to outdoor access. Many people first experience the outdoors through some sort of facilitated access, like an outdoor education organization or a school group. These organizations must secure a permit to take groups on public lands, but the Forest Service does not have the staffing necessary to issue and administer new permits. When this happens, the agencies will simply refuse to issue new permits, and diverse populations will lose opportunities to experience the outdoors through a facilitated experience. For example, the Seattle YMCA's BOLD & GOLD program has been unable to get permits to operate climbing programs on the public lands near Seattle because of permit moratoriums. They have been forced to take participants to Canada to teach them rock climbing, driving past many suitable teaching locations that are closer to Seattle. Likewise, the Forest Service does not have capacity to process new permit applications for Colorado Mountain Club schools, especially for winter activities like avalanche courses, which help new recreation users learn how to travel safely in the backcountry.

A lack of Forest Service capacity also affects the Agency's ability to protect cultural resources that connect Indigenous communities to the landscape. For example, the Humboldt Historic Trail in the Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness has existed since before Euro-American settlement of the region. Now, it's impassable due to countless downed trees and the growth of dense brush. The Forest Service spent millions in the Yolla Bollys during the 2020 fire season to fight the August Complex fire, yet there seems to be no money to clear a trail that has existed for millennia.

Addressing Climate Change

Changing climate conditions contribute to more frequent and extreme weather events, catastrophic fires, invasive species, prolonged drought, disease proliferation, and expanding algal blooms and aquatic dead zones. Outdoor recreationists are frequently on the frontline of witnessing these changes and their impacts on fish and wildlife, recreation infrastructure, and access due to extreme weather events such as flooding and wildfires. These changes fundamentally affect the annual \$788 billion outdoor recreation economy.¹⁶

There are many aspects to addressing climate change, including reducing climate pollution; increasing resilience to the impacts of climate change; incentivizing well-paying jobs and economic growth; protecting public health; preserving our lands, waters, and biodiversity; and ensuring equity for affected and vulnerable communities. This takes a nationwide effort, and the Forest Service must be part of our nationwide effort to address climate change; to do so, it must build capacity.

National forests store approximately 13,800 teragrams of ecosystem carbon¹⁷ and these lands play an important role in addressing the climate crisis. We can take an "all lands" approach to addressing climate change, from protecting intact landscapes and wildlife migration corridors, to actively managing

¹⁶ Sportsmen & Sportswomen Climate Statement. (2021, February). Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <https://www.trcp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sportsmen-Sportswomen-Climate-Statement-Final-February-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Carbon-National%20Forests-Grasslands.pdf>

disturbed areas to increase carbon sequestration. However, we cannot only focus on carbon storage and sequestration. The climate will continue to warm even under the most aggressive response scenarios. We must prepare for and respond to related environmental changes—from larger, more frequent and more intense wildfires, to changes in snowpack and water supplies, species distribution, and human settlement patterns.

Forest-wide and site-specific plans must be drafted and implemented to proactively address climate impacts and to restore landscapes and infrastructure as they are damaged or destroyed by wildfire, changes in surface water, and melting glaciers. However, planning and implementation takes time and personnel. Currently, planning processes are delayed or tabled for lack of capacity. Often, forests can only take on one or a few site-specific projects each year because one biologist must serve an entire forest in lieu of there being at least one biologist per district, or because positions are simply empty. Projects—even planning for future projects—cannot get done if there are not people to do them.

For example, the Sierra National Forest had to close campgrounds during the busy summer of 2019 because of extensive stands of beetle-killed snags that threatened to fall at any moment on people and infrastructure. The forest could not address the safety concern because they didn't have funding or staff to develop a fuels reduction project. The next summer, 2020, the entire landscape burned in the Creek Fire.

The Forest Service must increase the pace and scale of forest plan revisions in order to outline bold, visionary, and climate-focused plans for each national forest. These are the foundations upon which the site-specific actions needed to address the climate crisis are built. Forest plan revision is supposed to occur every 15 years, but most forests are operating under plans that are at least 20 years old. Increasing the pace and scale of forest plan revision cannot be achieved through cutting corners and “streamlining” processes, but requires investment in personnel. Every National Forest could start forest plan revisions in 2021 if there were a planning team for every forest, and if these planning teams were not built at the expense of everyday forest function. With only 1 or 2 planning teams per region, however, it will take decades to complete this much-needed effort.

The Forest Service cannot—and should not—march boldly off into the future following a plan from the past. As any outdoor enthusiast knows, hiking with outdated maps in a changing landscape is a recipe for disaster—costing more time and money in the end than investing in a new map at the outset. For example, forest management plays a role in addressing the climate crisis, but it must be done judiciously, and not at the expense of biodiversity, critical carbon sinks, or recreation opportunities. Completing forest planning *before* implementing forest management projects helps to ensure that forest management occurs in a manner, time, and place that will bring the most benefit to the environment, local communities, and the economy.

Planning is necessary to identify lands and waters that could be protected and how best to protect these places. It is also critical to identifying where to develop energy resources so that our pursuit of clean energy does not come at the expense of biodiversity, recreation opportunities, or other critical resources.

Additional capacity is also needed for plan and project implementation. For example, in Colorado, it recently took more than 5 years for the Forest Service to design and approve a 3-mile reroute on an ecologically unsustainable trail. The high-use route was severely eroded and was degrading local waterways and Boreal Toad habitat. The delay in addressing these problems was entirely due to a lack of agency capacity to process the necessary NEPA analysis. The answer to this type of dilemma, however, is not to reduce NEPA requirements—the government must carefully consider and disclose the impacts of proposed actions—but to hire the necessary staff to do this important work. This is just one example of how diminished agency capacity can harm biodiversity and recreation.

Conclusion

Recreation budgets have remained the same year-over-year while recreation user numbers have exploded. This, when combined with inflation, means recreation budgets compared with needs are effectively declining each year. The same holds true for almost every aspect of the Forest Service — budgets are stagnant (at best), needs and demands are growing, and it's impossible for the agency to keep doing more (and more) with less. Bold, visionary change is needed to reinvigorate the Forest Service so that the agency can meet its full potential and live up to the majesty of the lands under its care. Our National Forests—one of the great prides of this nation—are neglected. In order to meet the challenges facing our nation, and National Forests, today, we must invest in the Forest Service and grow agency capacity to make it once again the unparalleled steward of our nation's public lands.

Winter Wildlands Alliance is a national non-profit, whose mission is to promote and protect winter wildlands and quality human-powered snowsports experiences on public lands. The Mountaineers is a Washington state-based outdoor education non-profit organization, hosting a wide range of outdoor activities and advocating for preservation of public lands and responsible recreational access. Both Winter Wildlands and The Mountaineers are members of Outdoor Alliance, a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. In addition to Winter Wildlands and The Mountaineers, the Outdoor Alliance coalition includes the Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, American Alpine Club, Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation. Together, we represent the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.