

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

Testimony of Adam Cramer, Outdoor Alliance
 United States House of Representatives
 Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
 Public Witness Hearing, April 15, 2021

Chairman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Subcommittee members,

The Forest Service is responsible for managing 193 million acres of US public lands, including 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands. The Agency’s multiple-use mission requires a careful balance of conservation, recreation, and sustainable development of natural resources. It must also act as a good neighbor, working with adjacent state, federal, and private landowners to manage wildland fires, invasive species, and other cross-jurisdictional challenges. This year, Congress should appropriate a 50 percent increase from the 2021 enacted level for the National Forest System (including, importantly, the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness; Land Management Planning/Assessment/Monitoring; and the Salaries and Expenses budget lines), Capital Improvement and Maintenance, and Forest and Rangeland Research account funds as follows:

Fund	Increase (\$ in millions)	Total FY22 Appropriation (\$ in millions)
National Forest System	\$893.45	\$2,860.35
Capital Improvement and Maintenance	\$62.7	\$188.1
Forest and Rangeland Research	\$129.4	\$388.2

A 50 percent increase in these accounts within the Forest Service budget would help to rebuild function and capacity within the agency, which has diminished in recent years. This funding would allow the Forest Service to invest in core operations for national forests and grasslands, desperately-needed land management and recreation planning, critical science, and infrastructure needs.

We also ask you to continue to strengthen the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) by providing balanced allocations between federal and state programs under the LWCF umbrella, exercising strong oversight of the Administration’s proposed project lists, and avoiding recessions of past-year funds that could be used for other LWCF project needs.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of



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Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation’s public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

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.

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.

Since 1977, the number of recreation visitor days on national forest trails has increased 376 percent. Although visitation was trending upwards prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented visitation—and stress—to National Forest lands. 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.

Creating Jobs

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. In 2017, outdoor recreation use generated significantly more in gross receipts than any other commercial activity on Forest Service lands. 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



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planning—and permitting, monitoring, education, and management—to better support and encourage outdoor recreation and the outdoor recreation economy.

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 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.

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. In short, without more capacity the Forest Service cannot help rural communities meet the full potential of the outdoor recreation economy.

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. 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.

Inadequate Forest Service staff capacity to process 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



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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 by 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

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. National forests, which store a significant amount of carbon, play an important role in addressing the climate crisis.

Forest plans are the foundations upon which the climate solutions are built but most forests are operating under plans that are woefully out of date. The Forest Service cannot—and should not—march boldly off into the future following a plan from the past. Forest plans must be updated 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. This type of planning is also necessary to identify lands and waters that could be protected to help achieve 30x30 goals, and planning would determine 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. However, planning and implementation takes time and personnel. Currently, planning processes are delayed or tabled for lack of capacity. Projects—even planning for future projects—cannot get done if there are not people to do them.

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.

