

* Alpine Lakes Protection Society * American Rivers * American Whitewater * Cascade Forest Conservancy *
*Conservation Northwest * Olympic Forest Coalition * Pacific Rivers * Pilchuck Audubon Society *
* The Mountaineers * The Wilderness Society * Trout Unlimited * Washington Trails Association *
*Washington Wild * Washington State Chapter – Sierra Club * WildEarth Guardians *

Glenn Casamassa, Regional Forester
U.S. Forest Service – Pacific Northwest Region
1220 SW Third Avenue
Portland, OR 97204

March 19, 2019

Subject: Watershed Improvements and Legacy Roads and Trails

Dear Mr. Casamassa:

We would like to congratulate you and your staff on the accomplishments achieved with respect to aquatic, riparian and watershed restoration. According to your 2018 Aquatic and Riparian Restoration Annual Report, twice as many fish passage barriers (63) were fixed last year compared to the average (30). And the National Watershed Condition Framework Status/Accomplishment Report for 2011-2017 highlights the 20 watersheds improved in Region 6 largely as a result of road and aquatic focused essential projects (79%). Many of our groups have been active partners with the agency in our local forests and are pleased to see these successes.

As an introduction, we are members of the Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative (WWRI) and are dedicated to re-establishing and maintaining healthy aquatic and forest ecosystems in Washington's national forests. We first came together as a coalition in 2007 because of our mutual concerns on the lack of progress being made on the Memorandum of Agreement the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) signed with the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology). Federal, state and private forest landowners were required to improve their forest roads by 2015 to be in compliance with both the federal Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act to protect water, fish and wildlife habitat (1999 Forest and Fish Law). Our coalition worked with Congressman Norm Dicks (WA-06) to establish the National USFS Legacy Roads and Trails program (LRT) which provided funds targeted specifically to meet these requirements. Since then, our coalition has continued advocating for the program because of how well Region 6 has managed the funds and because of the accomplishments we have seen on the ground. We have also seen how road improvements and maintenance are important for ensuring recreational access. Over \$32M has gone to projects in Washington State, which has not only improved watersheds that support clean and safe drinking water, wildlife and fish habitat, but also improved recreation opportunities across Region 6.

Unfortunately, despite strong partner support and support from nearly the entire Pacific Northwest delegation, Legacy Roads and Trails was combined with general road maintenance in the Fiscal Year 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act. Given the absence of dedicated funding for LRT in this year's budget, we request your continued focus and leadership on watershed and aquatic restoration, which still requires a strong investment in order to reduce the impacts from the Agency's road system.

The Forest Service has made progress but there is still a long way to go. For context:

- 39% (8,245 miles) of the 21,452 miles of national forest roads in Washington are high risk to aquatics¹
- 12% of the Region's road system was identified as "likely not needed" through the 2015 Travel Analysis Process²

¹ USFS Region 6 Year 15 Summary Report for R6 FS and Department of Ecology Clean Water Act MOA, October 2016.

- 78% of national forest watersheds in Washington are harmed by roads and trails³
- 1,400+ fish passage barriers have been identified on USFS waterways in Washington⁴
 - \$1.2M/year is needed to correct the 26 identified salmon and steelhead culvert barriers within 5 years in the Olympic and Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forests.⁵
- -42% drop in Region 6’s road maintenance (CMRD) funding from 2008-2018⁶

Washington State in particular is at the forefront of these challenges. Private forest landowners have invested \$315M to improve or decommission thousands of miles of roads and fix 7,230 fish passage barriers since 2000⁷. The State is allocating millions to fix “injunction” culverts on state-owned highways for salmon recovery. And the Governor’s office is moving forward with immediate actions to save the critically endangered Southern Resident Orcas, which depend on Chinook salmon that spawn from high quality habitat on federal lands. Under the umbrella of “shared stewardship” it is imperative that the Forest Service work with the State to prioritize and fund watershed and aquatic restoration actions.

Our coalition has diverse interests – some focus on public lands conservation, others on recreation, others on water quality and still others on fish – yet we have been able to agree that roads need to be addressed to ensure recreational access and healthy aquatic habitat. We know that clean water, thriving fisheries and reliable access are critical for Washington’s economy:

- \$1.1B sport fishing industry relies on clear, cold forest streams for healthy fish runs
- \$21B recreation industry depends on accessible forest roads
- \$92M shellfish economy requires clean water to thrive

Through the years, we have seen how our collective strengths have brought value to the agency. We encourage increased focus on restoring watersheds, protecting sources of clean water and supporting economic benefits from outdoor recreation in our region’s forests. We would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you in person to share more about our concerns, to hear from you on your priorities, and to see how we can continue this partnership that leads to watershed improvements. We can arrange a field trip in Washington or a meeting in Seattle or Portland. Please let us know what works for your schedule.

In the meantime, we ask that you continue to prioritize healthy watersheds and ensure funds are directed to these efforts.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

WWRI Coalition Members

Marlies Wierenga
Pacific NW Conservation Manager
WWRI Coalition Coordinator
WildEarth Guardians

Mike Anderson
Senior Policy Analyst
The Wilderness Society

² USFS Region 6 Travel Analysis Outcomes and Next Steps, December 2015.

³ USFS Watershed Condition Framework. Poor/Fair condition of watersheds from road/trail indicator.

⁴ USFS Pacific Northwest Region data.

⁵ Puget Sound Federal Task Force Action Plan – Interim Draft FY 2017-2021, January 2017.

⁶ USFS Pacific Northwest Region data.

⁷ WDNR. Forest Practices Habitat Conservation Plan Annual Report. July 2017-June 2018.

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