

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

August 17, 2017

Thomas Tidwell
Chief, US Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1111

Dear Chief Tidwell,

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of eight member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, and the Mazamas and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, and backcountry ski and snowshoe on Forest Service lands, waters, and snowscapes. Forest Service lands are extremely important for our constituents.

We understand that the current administration is looking for ways to streamline and downsize federal agencies. We fear that this effort will negatively impact the Forest Service recreation program, especially as the most recent director of this program has retired. It is important that the Forest Service continue to fully staff its recreation program. Recreation is the means through which most people experience national forests and other public lands, fueling an \$887 billion outdoor recreation economy that generates 7.6 million jobs in the United States. Without recreation opportunities most people will not visit our national forests and over time these lands, and the agency, will lose value in the eyes of the American public. Despite the importance of recreation for the Forest Service, all too often recreation programs are overlooked or abandoned come budget time.

Across the country the vast amount of backcountry skiing, hiking, mountain biking, climbing, and paddling occurs on lands and waters managed by the Forest Service. These, and other, recreation activities do not occur in a vacuum. More often than not recreation activities depend on Forest Service infrastructure – trails, campgrounds, and trailheads – and these facilities must be maintained. Public-private partnerships are one way to address maintenance issues, but without Forest Service volunteer coordinators or other agency staff to manage volunteers, these partnerships wither on the vine. For example, all across the country mountain bike groups stand ready to assist in trail construction and maintenance, but oftentimes their intentions are stymied because the local Forest lacks the capacity to utilize these willing volunteers.



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In recent years the Forest Service has made huge strides in recreation management. The 2012 Planning Rule specifically calls out the need to manage sustainable recreation. As a result, we've seen the early adopter forests draft management plans that recognize and build upon important recreation resources specific to each forest. The new plans better utilize the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum to integrate recreation management in with other aspects of forest management, create frameworks to better support partnership efforts, and include plan components specific to managing recreation resources and opportunities. Likewise, through travel planning the Forest Service is finding a balance between facilitating motorized recreation and protecting soils, wildlife, and other resources from the impacts of these activities. This is important forward progress and we fear that any decline in investment in the Forest Service recreation program will halt this progress.

Outdoor recreation on Forest Service lands continues to expand and evolve. For example, backcountry skiing – which takes place almost exclusively on Forest Service lands - is among the top 10 activities for growth in participation rates over the past 3 years.¹ According to Forest Service research the number of participants in backcountry skiing is projected to increase by 55% – 106% by 2060 even as resort skiing declines.² Backcountry skiing is just one example, and people will continue to flock to Forest Service lands to pursue outdoor recreation activities regardless of whether the agency manages these uses. Without proper management, however, conflict between uses and natural resource damage are inevitable, violating the agency's regulations and federal law. Thankfully, the Forest Service has the structure in place to manage recreation alongside other uses on National Forest lands. What it is lacking are staff and resources to carry out planning, maintain infrastructure, and connect with local communities and the public at large. Consider winter travel planning – the Over-Snow Vehicle Rule is a tool the Forest Service can use to more thoughtfully manage over-snow vehicle recreation and diffuse winter recreation conflicts. However, in the two years since the Rule was finalized, only 6 out of 84 forests have had the capacity to begin winter travel planning.

Considering the significant positive economic benefits that outdoor recreation on Forest Service lands has on local communities, and conversely the damage that unmanaged recreation can cause to Forest Service resources, we cannot overstate the importance

¹ Outdoor Foundation's 2016 Outdoor Participation Topline Report. Available at: <http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/ResearchParticipation2016Topline.pdf>. This report classifies all forms of backcountry skiing as "telemark skiing".

² Cordell, Ken. Outdoor recreation trends and futures: a technical document supporting the Forest Service 2010 RPA Assessment. Available at: http://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs150.pdf



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of the Forest Service recreation program and the need for this program to be fully staffed and for this program to remain a Forest Service priority.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Policy Director
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Adam Cramer, Executive Director, Outdoor Alliance
Brady Robinson, Executive Director, Access Fund
Wade Blackwood, Executive Director, American Canoe Association
Mark Singleton, Executive Director, American Whitewater
Dave Wiens, Executive Director, International Mountain Bicycling Association
Mark Menlove, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers
Phil Powers, Executive Director, American Alpine Club
Lee Davis, Executive Director, the Mazamas

