

Government Accountability Office Trails Study – Key Points

June 2013

Key Points

- **National Forest trails are receiving more public use each year but are increasingly stressed and maintenance can't keep pace with the growing demand.** Use of our national forests has been on the rise since the 1970's. More people are heading into our forests in pursuit of exercise, relaxation, and adventure. Trails are the arteries into our forests, but when a trail is constructed it must be maintained. If it's not, they become impassable at best and a public health hazard at worst.
- **Our trail network is just too important to let lapse into ruin and disrepair.** Forest trails help fuel a \$730 billion recreation industry; yet they receive a paltry investment in return. The automatic spending cuts from sequestration promise make the situation even worse.
- **Given their growing importance as gateways to the great outdoors, our trails deserve a more reliable funding mechanism to ensure they don't lapse into disrepair and ultimately threaten public access.**
- **Trails work brings people together through unique partnerships.** Hunters, horsemen, anglers, and conservationists all work in partnership to maintain trails. Local examples are great. Congress should encourage the use of more creative partnerships to get more out of every dollar, empower our volunteer networks, and ensure existing resources are use more efficiently.
- **Additional funding is necessary to maintain access to national forests.** In this era of budget-constraints, additional funding for trail maintenance may be unlikely but is incredibly important. We are always going to behind the eight-ball until we better prioritize investments into our trail systems. The Forest Service with the help of creative volunteer partnerships is working hard to make use of limited resources but they continue to lose ground due to insufficient funding
- **Congress and the Forest Service should also look for creative solutions to help supplement limited funds.** Volunteers play an important role in trail maintenance, yet there is no overall strategy for example for increasing volunteerism and ensuring that volunteers are effectively utilized for trail maintenance projects. Fire crews could help maintain trails while not fighting fires. These are the types of solutions we need to explore.
- **Trails benefit everyone—from hikers and equestrians to mountain bicyclists and off-road vehicle users.** Trails protect and enhance public access for everyone. (Local examples from your backyard are great.)

Summary of Key Findings

- The Forest Service trail system faces a \$314 million backlog in trail maintenance and an additional \$210 million backlog in annual maintenance, capital improvements, and

operations. Combined, the Forest Service trail maintenance backlog exceeds a half-billion dollars.

- Only one-quarter of the agency's 158,000 miles of trails meets agency standards for maintenance and nearly two-thirds receive no maintenance at all.
- Nearly a quarter of Forest Service trail maintenance comes from volunteers, state funding, and other federal and non-federal sources.
- The Forest Service can do a much better job effectively utilizing volunteers to maintain the trail system.
- The trail maintenance backlog inhibits trail use, poses safety hazards, harms natural resources, and increases annual maintenance costs.

Answers to Tough Questions

Question: Are chainsaws in Wilderness the solution?

Answer: The study noted that many agency staff and stakeholders interviewed did not believe that the prohibition on chainsaws in wilderness was a cause of the trail maintenance problem. We believe that the Forest Service needs to look at using all available tools in wilderness, in accordance with the Wilderness Act. But expanding the use of chainsaws won't solve the trail maintenance problem. Many trails are located outside existing wilderness. Much of the maintenance work inside wilderness is in remote locations where access is much more time-consuming than the actual maintenance work. Finally, much trail maintenance needs includes activities like maintaining trail tread, recontouring, and preventing erosion—activities that do not involve chainsaws at all.

Question: With the current debt, is it realistic to ask for more funding?

Answer: Trails funding represents a tiny fraction of the Forest Service budget, which is again a tiny fraction of the overall budget. But trails play a huge role to millions of Americans. Even a tiny increase in funding—inconsequential in the bigger budget picture—could go a long way towards maintaining access and the quality of life that so many Americans have come to rely upon.

Question: Can't the trails be maintained by volunteers?

Answer: Volunteers play a very important role and contribute countless hours to trail maintenance each year. Congress and the Forest Service can and should do more to encourage and increase volunteerism. But volunteers alone cannot solve the trail maintenance problems. Some trail issues are simply too complicated for volunteers, while many trail systems are located in remote places with an insufficient volunteer base. So, while volunteers can supplement agency work, they cannot replace it entirely. According to the study, volunteers, combined with other state and federal funding sources carry out only a quarter of the Forest Service trail maintenance activities.

Question: Are trail closures ("rightsizing") the solution?

Answer: Trails are the best way for Americans to enjoy the outdoors. Without trails, Americans will lose that access. Trail closures should be a last resort. The study recommends a number of options to improve trail maintenance. We believe these options are the best approach to addressing the trail maintenance crisis.