

USDA Secretary Announces Infrastructure Improvements for Forest System Trails
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USDA Secretary Announces Infrastructure Improvements for Forest System Trails

Focused work will help agency reduce a maintenance backlog and make trails safer for users

WASHINGTON, Feb. 16, 2018 – U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue today announced the selection of 15 priority areas to help address the more than \$300 million trail maintenance backlog on national forests and grasslands.

Focused trail work in these areas, bolstered by partners and volunteers, is expected to help address needed infrastructure work so that trails managed by USDA Forest Service can be accessed and safely enjoyed by a wide variety of trails enthusiasts. About 25 percent of agency trails fit those standards while the condition of other trails lag behind.

“Our nation’s trails are a vital part of the American landscape and rural economies, and these priority areas are a major first step in USDA’s on-the-ground responsibility to make trails better and safer,” Secretary Perdue said. “The trail maintenance backlog was years in the making with a combination of factors contributing to the problem, including an outdated funding mechanism that routinely borrows money from programs, such as trails, to combat ongoing wildfires.

“This borrowing from within the agency interferes with other vital work, including ensuring that our more than 158,000 miles of well-loved trails provide access to public lands, do not harm natural resources, and, most importantly, provide safe passage for our users.”

This year the nation celebrates the 50th anniversary of the National Trails Systems Act which established America’s system of national scenic, historic, and recreation trails. A year focused on trails presents a pivotal opportunity for the Forest Service and partners to lead a shift toward a system of sustainable trails that are maintained through even broader shared stewardship.

The priority areas focus on trails that meet the requirements of the [National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act of 2016](#) (PDF, 224KB), which calls for the designation of up to 15 high priority areas where a lack of maintenance has led to reduced access to public land; increased risk of harm to natural resources; public safety hazards; impassable trails; or increased future trail maintenance costs. The act also requires the Forest Service to “significantly increase the role of volunteers and partners in trail maintenance” and to aim to double trail maintenance accomplished by volunteers and partners.

Shared stewardship to achieve on-the-ground results has long been core to Forest Service’s approach to trail maintenance, as demonstrated by partner groups such as the Pacific Crest Trail Association and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

“Our communities, volunteers and partners know that trails play an important role in the health of local economies and of millions of people nationwide, which means the enormity of our trail maintenance backlog must be adequately addressed now,” said USDA Forest Service Chief Tony Tooke. “The agency has a commitment to be a good neighbor, recognizing that people and communities rely on these trails to connect with each other and with nature.”

Each year, more than 84 million people get outside to explore, exercise and play on trails across national forests and grasslands and visits to these places help to generate 143,000 jobs annually through the recreation economy and more than \$9 million in visitor spending.

The 15 national trail maintenance priority areas encompass large areas of land and each have committed partners to help get the work accomplished. The areas are:

- **Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and Adjacent Lands, Montana:** The area includes the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Great Bear Wilderness Areas and most of the Hungry Horse, Glacier View, and Swan Lake Ranger Districts on the Flathead National Forest in northwest Montana on both sides of the Continental Divide. There are more than 3,200 miles of trails within the area, including about 1,700 wilderness miles.
- **Methow Valley Ranger District, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, Washington:** Methow Valley is a rural recreation-based community surrounded by more than 1.3 million acres of managed by the Forest Service. The area includes trails through the Pasayten and Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness Areas and more than 130 miles of National Pacific Crest and Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trails.
- **Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and Eagle Cap Wilderness, Idaho and Oregon:** This area includes more than 1,200 miles of trail and the deepest river canyon in North America as well as the remote alpine terrain of the Seven Devil's mountain range. The area also has 350,000 acres in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, the largest in Oregon.
- **Central Idaho Wilderness Complex, Idaho and Montana:** The area includes about 9,600 miles of trails through the Frank Church River of No Return; Gospel Hump; most of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness areas; portions of the Payette, Salmon-Challis, Nez Perce and Clearwater national forests; and most of the surrounding lands. The trails inside and outside of wilderness form a network of routes that give access into some of the most remote country in the Lower 48.
- **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico:** The trail's 3,100 continuous miles follows the spine of the Rocky Mountains from Mexico to Canada, including more than 1,900 miles of trails across 20 national forests. The trail runs a diverse route with some sections in designated wilderness areas and others running through towns, providing those communities with the opportunity to boost the local economy with tourism dollars.
- **Wyoming Forest Gateway Communities:** Nearly 1,000 miles of trail stretch across the almost 10 million acres of agency-managed lands in Wyoming, which include six national forests and one national grassland. The contribution to the state's outdoor recreation economy is therefore extremely important in the state.
- **Northern California Wilderness, Marble Mountain and Trinity Alps:** There are more than 700 miles of trails through these wilderness areas, which are characterized by very steep mountain terrain in fire-dependent ecosystems that are subject to heavy winter rainfall and/or snow. As such, they are subject to threat from flooding, washout, landslide and other erosion type events which, combined with wildfires, wash out trails and obstruct passage.

- **Angeles National Forest, California:** The area, which includes nearly 1,000 miles of trails, is immediately adjacent to the greater Los Angeles area where 15 million people live within 90 minutes and more than 3 million visit. Many of those visitors are young people from disadvantaged communities without local parks.
- **Greater Prescott Trail System, Arizona:** This 300-mile system of trails is a demonstration of work between the Forest Service and multiple partners. The system is integrated with all public lands at the federal, state and local level to generate a community-based trail system.
- **Sedona Red Rock Ranger District Trail System, Coconino National Forest, Arizona:** About 400 miles of trail provide a wide diversity of experiences with year-round trail opportunities, including world-class mountain biking in cooler months and streamside hiking in the heat of the summer.
- **Colorado Fourteeners:** Each year, hundreds of thousands of hikers trek along over 200 miles of trail to access Colorado's mountains that are higher than 14,000 feet. The Forest Service manages 48 of the 54 fourteeners, as they are commonly called.
- **Superior National Forest, Minnesota:** The more than 2,300 miles of trail on this forest have faced many catastrophic events, including large fires and a major wind storm downed millions of trees in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in 1999. A similar storm in 2016 reached winds up to 85 mph and toppled trees on several thousand acres and made the western 13 miles of Kekekabic Trail impassible.
- **White Mountain National Forest Partner Complex, Maine and New Hampshire:** Approximately 600 miles of non-motorized trails are maintained by partners. Another 600 miles of motorized snowmobile trails are adopted and maintained by several clubs. Much of that work centers on providing safe public access to the mountain and valleys of New Hampshire and Maine.
- **Southern Appalachians Capacity Enhancement Model, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia:** The more than 6,300 miles of trails in this sub region include some of the most heavily used trails in the country yet only 28 percent meet or exceed agency standards. The work required to bring these trails to standard will require every tool available from partner and volunteer skills to contracts with professional trail builders.
- **Iditarod National Historic Trail Southern Trek, Alaska:** In southcentral Alaska, the Southern Trek is in close proximity to more than half the state's population and connects with one of the most heavily traveled highways in the state. The Chugach National Forest and partners are restoring and developing more than 180 miles of the trail system, connecting the communities of Seward, Moose Pass, Whittier, and Girdwood.

For more information about the USDA Forest Service, visit www.fs.fed.us.



C. L. "Butch" Otter
Governor

David R. Langhorst
Director

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March 1, 2017

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I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act (H.R. 845)*. We are excited at the possibilities it provides, and the associated recognition of the importance in maintaining recreation opportunities on USFS lands for the enjoyment of the public. The emphasis on coordinated volunteer efforts is a welcome approach, and critical to solving the maintenance backlog we collectively find ourselves facing.

While there are no doubt thousands of miles of trails across the country in need of repair/maintenance, we feel strongly the central portion of Idaho has reached a critical juncture and should be prioritized as an area of emphasis. More specifically, we'd like for you to consider this area as one of the "priority" areas, as identified in H.R. 845.

The borders of this particular area would be defined as follows: North on state highway 55 (from the juncture FH 24, Banks, Idaho) to state highway 95. North on state highway 95 to the juncture with state highway 13. Northeast on state highway 13 to the juncture with state highway 12. East on state highway 12 to the juncture with state highway 93. South on state highway 93 to the juncture with highway 75. West on state highway 75 to the juncture with highway 21. West on Forest Highway 24 back to the juncture with state highway 55. An enclosed map is included for the sake of reference.

This area is unique for a variety of reasons, most notably for including the entire Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Outfitters, hikers, and equestrians have all expressed concern over trails effectively disappearing in this area due to lack of maintenance and associated use.

These trails have immeasurable historical and recreational value, and once served as the conduit for advocacy of the original Wilderness designation of these lands. While the Wilderness designation limits use and access by design, it simply must have *some* degree of access for people to enjoy its benefit.

Those that advocate for state control over federal lands (in Idaho at least), are pointing to this particular area as an example of the need for "change" of land management in general. While we are extremely sympathetic to the reduced recreation budget allocations of the USFS, there is no arguing that some type of focused, concerted effort needs to be made or those voices will continue to get louder.

Additionally, this area of central Idaho has some of the highest unemployment rates in the state. The loss of traditional, extraction-based revenue through logging, grazing, and the timber industries has severely impacted rural communities in this area. Many of those communities are transitioning into a recreation-focused economy, only to see their "product" eroding to an inaccessible, and largely "unmanaged" landscape. We see H.R. 845 as an opportunity to address those very real financial and recreational losses.

If you are not already aware, IDPR distributes \$6-10 million dollars in grants annually for recreation providers across the state. Approximately \$3 million dollars of that is specifically ear-marked for trail opportunities in particular. Identifying this area as a "priority" area would likely communicate a sense of urgency to both the IDPR Board and the associated grant committees that could result in increased funding for this area.

We are sufficiently concerned about this issue that we are also prepared to offer state assistance and resources to assist the USFS in implementing HR 845. We have a Non-Motorized Trails Program Manager (Leo Hennessy) and an Outdoor Recreation Analyst (Jeff Cook) we will make available for this effort. Between them they have 40+ years of experience in trails maintenance and management. By leveraging existing relationships with USFS recreation staff, user groups and the public, we believe they can lend considerable technical expertise to the process of determining priority trails, coordinating volunteer projects, and tracking progress.

I have also instructed our Recreation Programs Bureau Chief (Dave Claycomb) to do whatever he feels is necessary to ensure the success of this effort, should this area be selected as one of the "priority" areas. Dave has previously served as the IDPR Grant Program Manager and IDPR State OHV Trails Program Manager and brings a unique background of technical, financial, and management experience to the table.

Finally, I believe it's important to note that we brought a wide-spectrum of stakeholders together to discuss this potential priority area and the idea of our department lending staff support to the project. Both ideas met with unanimous support. Some of those stakeholders include the Backcountry Horseman Association, Idaho Trails Association, Idaho Conservation League, the Valley County Economic Development Council, the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association, the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation, and the Idaho Recreation Council.

I thank you again for the opportunity to provide input in this process, and look forward to seeing the successful implementation of H.R. 845 across the national landscape.

Sincerely,

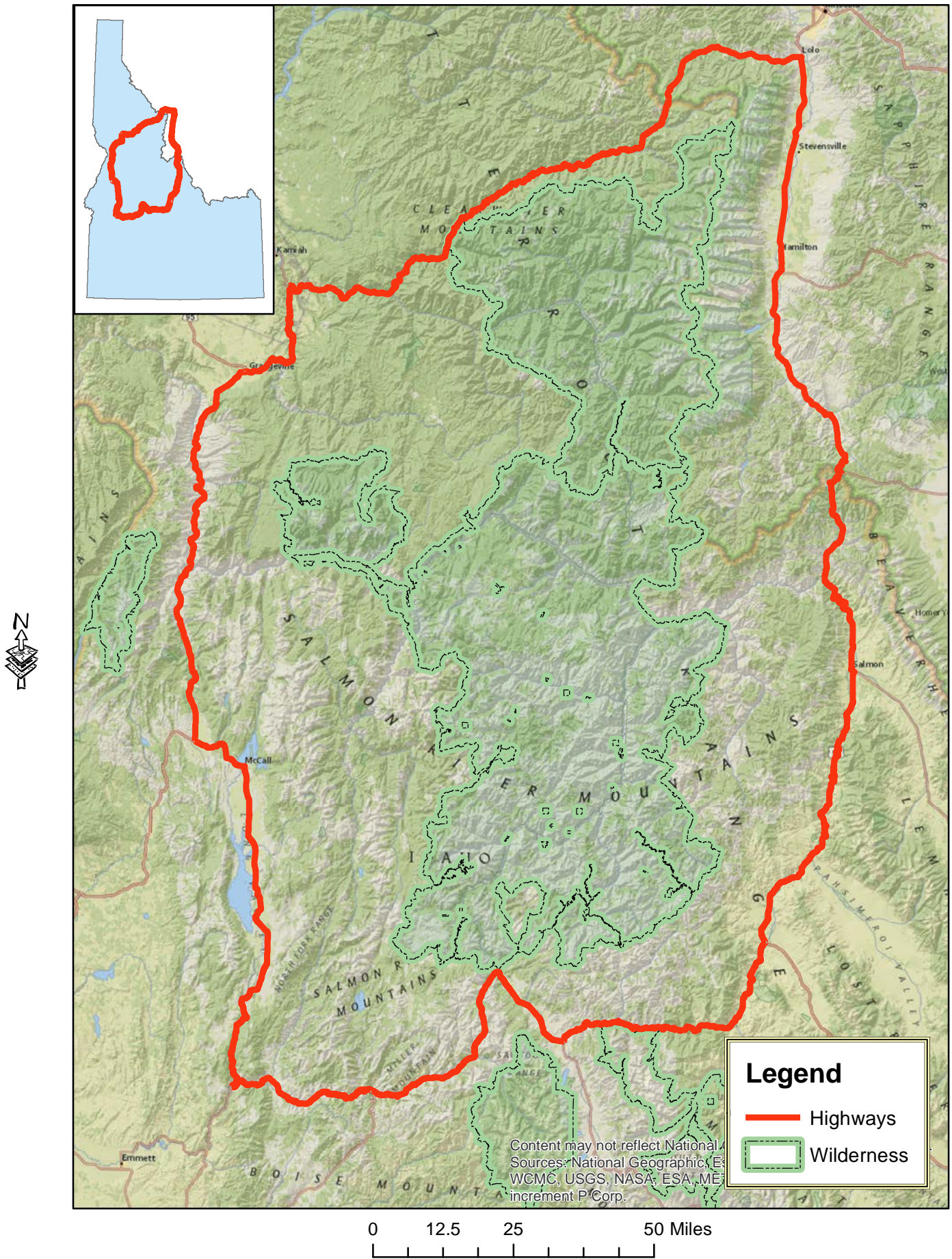
A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David R. Langhorst", with a stylized flourish at the end.

David R. Langhorst, Director

Enclosure

Cc: Kent Wellner
Chris Hartman

Stewardship Priority Area



1:1,479,389

Letter of Support from the Payette Forest Coalition regarding the National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act

February 24, 2017

Dear Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation:

The Payette Forest Coalition (PFC) was formed to build diverse community support and provide input to the Forest Service for forest restoration projects. Restoration projects are the primary focus of the PFC, because the current conditions of the forest depart from the historical range of landscape structure and function. Treatment actions will help restore ecosystem function and forest health by altering forest structures and their distribution on the landscape.

Relevant forest structures include both natural and human-made structure (roads, stream crossings, trails, and supporting recreation infrastructure). One of the PFC's goals is specific to Forest access and recreation: "Enhance the road and trail network to support access for resource management, outdoor recreation and public safety."

The Payette Forest Coalition supports the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation's proposal for a Priority Area for Central Idaho for consideration under the *National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act (H.R. 845)* (see attached map). According to the legislation, the Forest Service will consider public comments on designating at least one Priority Area for trail stewardship per Forest Service region. Priority areas will be selected by the Forest Service with the goal of increasing the role of volunteers and partners in trail maintenance.

The members of the PFC can attest to the significant backlog of trail maintenance on both motorized and non-motorized trail systems. The priority area is a well-defined region that includes significant portions of the Payette National Forest, including the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. The lack of trail maintenance within this proposed priority area has both limited and eliminated access for diverse trail users, increased hazardous conditions for recreationists, and led to resource impacts from trail erosion on waterways that support threatened fish species, among other negative effects.

A number of recreation groups on the Payette National Forest already participate in trail maintenance programs and coordinate with the Forest Service, but more work is needed to increase partnerships, prioritize trails, and coordinate efforts.

We respectfully request that you designate the IDPR proposed priority area as one of the Priority Areas.

On behalf of the Payette Forest Coalition,

Michael Gibson Steering Committee Member
Payette Forest Coalition