



THE
WILDERNESS
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Gov. Report: Public Access Threatened by Inadequate Trail Resources

***Wilderness Society and Backcountry Horsemen say 21st century
trail investments should match value of recreation***

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WASHINGTON (June 27, 2013) – The National Forest System contains the largest network of trails in the world but lacks the resources and staff to keep up with growing recreation demands according to the first [government study](#) on the topic in nearly twenty-five years.

Two national public lands groups who requested the study say the results clearly spell out the need for improved investments for the Forest Service trail system, including more reliable funding and a more systematic approach to organizing volunteers.

According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a non-partisan government research wing, Forest Service trails are receiving more use than ever even as the maintenance and reconstruction backlog ballooned to \$524 million in 2012. That figure has increased by more than half since 1989, the last time the GAO analyzed the National Forest trail system.

While more people than ever are heading into National Forests in pursuit of exercise, relaxation, and adventure, only one quarter of all trails are maintained to standard. According to the report, this backlog prevents public access, poses dangers to public safety, and degrades clean water.

The Wilderness Society and Back Country Horsemen of America originally [requested](#) the study from several prominent members of Congress including Rep. Simpson of Idaho, Rep. Lummis of Wyoming, and Rep. Moran of Virginia.

The groups say the report's findings present cause for concern but are not an insurmountable challenge.

According to The Wilderness Society, the most straight-forward solution is more reliable trail funding to better match the benefit recreation provides back to the public and economy.

National Forests receive over 165 million visitors each year but only about \$80 million each year is dedicated to maintaining the trails these visitors use. That works out to be less than 50 cents of on-the-ground dollars per visitor.

"Trails contribute over \$80 billion each year to the outdoor recreation industry but they receive a paltry investment in return," said Paul Spitler, Director of Wilderness Campaigns. "In this era of budget-constraints, additional funding for trail maintenance may be difficult to acquire but it's incredibly important. At the same time we need to investigate other creative solutions to help supplement limited funds and stretch every dollar further," he said.

Volunteers are the biggest free resource available to help tackle the problem according to the Back Country Horsemen of America, one of the largest volunteer-based trail organizations in the country.

"We've seen first-hand how partnerships with the Forest Service brings people together and can leverage more resources more effectively," said Jim McGarvey, chairman of the Back Country Horsemen. "Congress and the Forest Service should encourage the use of more creative partnerships whenever possible to get more out of every dollar, empower our volunteer networks, and ensure existing resources are used more efficiently."

A shining example of volunteer power is found in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia, where the Forest Service convened a collaborative trails program and [leveraged volunteer contributions](#) to the equivalent of twenty-one full time employees in 2010.

"Our trails won't take care of themselves, so collaboration and leveraging resources and volunteer power is the name of the game now," said McGarvey. "Until we can get more dedicated trail dollars from Congress, these partnerships represent our best path forward."

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