



November 7, 2011

Honorable Mike Simpson, Chair
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
H-307 Capital
Washington, D.C. 20515

Honorable James Moran, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Honorable Cynthia Lummis
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, and Representative Lummis,

We are writing to request your assistance in addressing the serious decline in the condition of national forest trails that threatens access to America's public lands. Specifically, we would like you to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) study the maintenance situation on national forest trails so that we may design a solution that ensures reliable, high-quality trail access for forest visitors, including in Wilderness and backcountry areas.

Before there were roads and motor vehicles to use them, America traveled over a system of trails -- sometimes by horse and wagon and, in the more remote areas, by saddle and pack horse (or mule) or on foot. One of the first tasks of early Forest Rangers was to construct the trail system necessary to access and protect America's forest reserves. The majority of that system was in place by the 1950s. With the increased use of airplanes and helicopters (beginning in the 1940s and early 1950s) for administrative access to our public lands, the need for a trail system for forest protection has declined. ***The trail system, however, is still the only means of access for the millions of Americans who wish to enjoy our Wilderness and backcountry.***

In the 1980s, the GAO investigated the unmet maintenance and reconstruction backlog on the national forest trail system (GAO.RCED-89-182). In requesting the review, House Subcommittee Chair Bruce Vento expressed concern that "*deferred trail maintenance was resulting in decreased recreational opportunities, resource damage, and loss of major capital investments.*" The report found that national

forest trails had a nearly \$200 million maintenance backlog that threatened to cause significant resource damage and had rendered over 5000 miles of trails unusable to the public.

Since the time of the last GAO study, the national forest trail system has increased in mileage by 50% and public use has increased significantly. The maintenance backlog has increased as well: in 2009, the cost of resolving the backlog had grown to \$550,828,965. The sad reality is that the overall condition of the Forest Service trail system has been in decline for more than half a century. The loss of major capital investments by the American people that Chairman Vento spoke of in the 1980s continues to be a huge concern. The cost of re-constructing or replacing the degraded trail system will be considerably greater than that of maintaining the current system.

At current funding levels, the Forest Service will manage to standard just 21% of the 150,000+ miles in the national forest trail system. Over 120,000 miles of national forest trails will not be maintained to an adequate standard. A large portion of the trail system receives very little or no maintenance, threatening access to vast swaths of public land.

Changes in the forest landscape are only making the problems worse. Wildfires and insect and disease mortality are adding to the backlog daily. At present, millions of acres of lodgepole pine in the Rockies stand dead as the result of the mountain pine beetle, and in some eastern states, hemlock has been devastated by the hemlock woolly adelgid. Within a few years, these woody skeletons will be falling over our trails like pick-up sticks. The significant increase in the number and size of wildfires in the west, combined with increasingly severe storm events is wreaking havoc on our trails. The dead trees from fire and insects will accumulate for 15 to 20 years.

Data in that 1989 GAO report can serve as a 'benchmark' from which to determine how the situation has worsened in recent years. Back Country Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society request a follow-up GAO report to look at the status of the maintenance backlog. Some of the issues that we suggest GAO consider including are:

- What is the extent of the trail maintenance backlog on national forest land and how does this backlog compare to the backlog that existed at the time of the last GAO study in the 1980s?
- What opportunities exist to increase the effectiveness of national forest trail maintenance activities?
- How can volunteer resources be used more efficiently to maintain national forest trails and are limitations restricting the effectiveness and utilization of volunteers?
- What sources of federal and non-federal funding have been or can be used to maintain national forest trails?
- In which geographic regions is the trail maintenance backlog most severe, and what are the impacts to the public of this backlog?

Back Country Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society have partnered to further our common interest in preserving, and preserving access to, wilderness and other public lands. We recognize the challenge of funding an adequate trail management program with existing tax dollars and stand ready to assist the agency identify other means to address the backlog. The first step in accomplishing that challenge is creating an awareness of the extent of, and factors contributing to, the problem.

Loss of our trail system is more than a 'quality of life' issue. In addition to connecting America with its public lands, the trail system connects America with its history – with Lewis and Clark, Jim Bridger, and the hundreds of thousands of emigrants who pushed west over the Oregon Trail, Lander Trail, Mormon-Pioneer Trail and others. When recreationists *take to* the trails they are re-living that history and re-committing to responsible stewardship of our public lands.

Paul Spitler
Senior Regional Conservation Representative
The Wilderness Society



Michael K. McGlenn
Chairman
Back Country Horsemen of America