



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

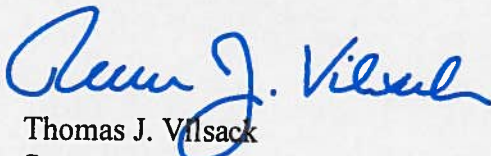
DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Darrell Issa
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Thomas Carper
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas J. Vilsack".

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-307 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Tom J. Vilsack", is positioned above the printed name and title of the Secretary.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Tom J. Vilsack", is positioned above the printed name and title of the Secretary.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
2235 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Cummings:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Tom J. Vilsack", is positioned above the printed name and title of the Secretary.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

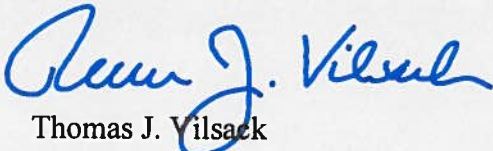
DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Tom Coburn
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
344 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Coburn:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Lowey:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas J. Wilsack".

Thomas J. Wilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
146A Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Shelby:

As required by 31 U.S.C. § 720 (Public Law 97-258), enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Thomas J. Vilsack", is positioned above the typed name and title.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary

Enclosure



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
Washington D.C. 20250



DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell
Director
Office of Management and Budget
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW.
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Ms. Burwell:

Enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled *FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability*.

The statement, prepared by the Department's Forest Service, is also being furnished to the U.S. Senate and House Committees on Appropriations, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Sincerely,

Phyllis K. Fong
Inspector General

Enclosure



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
Washington D.C. 20250



DEC 12 2013

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW., Room 7000
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Enclosed is the Department of Agriculture's statement of the actions taken on the recommendations in the U.S. Government Accountability Office Report GAO-13-618, dated June 27, 2013, entitled *FOREST SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability*.

The statement, prepared by the Department's Forest Service, is also being furnished to the U.S. Senate and House Committees on Appropriations, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and the Office of Management and Budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Phyllis K. Fong".

Phyllis K. Fong
Inspector General

Enclosure

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Statement of Action on the
U.S. Government Accountability Office Final Report GA0-13-618, *FOREST*
SERVICE TRAILS: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce
Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability

October 31, 2013

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service manages more than 158,000 miles of recreational trails offering hikers, horseback riders, cyclists, off-highway-vehicle drivers, and others access to national forests. To remain safe and usable, these trails need regular maintenance, such as removal of downed trees or bridge repairs. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) was asked to review the agency's trail maintenance activities. GAO's report examines (1) the extent to which the Forest Service is meeting trail maintenance needs and effects associated with any maintenance not done; (2) resources, including funding and labor, that the agency employs to maintain its trails; (3) factors, if any, complicating agency efforts to maintain its trails; and (4) options, if any, that could improve the agency's trail maintenance efforts. GAO reviewed laws and agency documents; analyzed Forest Service budget data for fiscal years (FY) 2006 through 2012 and trails data for FYs 2008 through 2012; and interviewed agency officials and representatives of 16 stakeholder groups selected to represent trail users, conservation, and industry.

General Comments

The Forest Service is committed to continuing its efforts to implement and integrate the agency's *A Framework/or Sustainable Recreation* which encompasses several of GAO's recommendations including the identification and provision of trails and trail systems that are ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable in the long term. In this time of budget reductions and sequestration, along with extreme wildfires and associated costs, agency leadership is faced with making decisions affecting numerous agency priorities. Within the constraints of appropriated resources and available workforce capability, the Forest Service is committed to implementing the steps and practices described in this Statement of Action.

This response incorporates all National Forest System trails, including those in wilderness and non-wilderness areas, and those managed for non-motorized and motorized use. For purposes of this response, the Forest Service has labeled each GAO Recommendation as A through D. As described below, the agency intends to begin work on each of the GAO recommendations to varying degrees in FY 2014. The Forest Service will look for opportunities to accelerate the timeframes stated in order to address the "gap" as expediently as possible. The results of the agency response to GAO Recommendations A and B will further inform and refine the agency actions related to GAO Recommendations C and D.

GAO Recommendation

To enhance the overall sustainability of the Forest Service's trail system, consistent with the vision articulated in *A Framework/in Sustainable Recreation*, and to reduce the trail

maintenance backlog, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Chief of the Forest Service to take several actions to improve the agency's trail maintenance approach in both the short- and long- term.

To improve agency management of its trails program in the long term, particularly in light of the gap between program needs and available resources, the agency should take the following two actions consistent with the agency's *A Framework for Sustainable Recreation*:

- A. In line with the *Framework's* emphasis on evaluating infrastructure investments and program costs, (1) ensure that the agency's management of its trails program includes an analysis of trails program needs and available resources and (2) develop options for narrowing the gap between program needs and resources.
- B. In line with the *Framework's* emphasis on sustainability, and to enhance trail sustainability over the long term. (1) improve guidance and increase training on sustainable trail design and (2) when appropriate, begin systematic, unit-level trail assessments that reevaluate trails with long-term sustainability as a goal.

USDA Response

The Forest Service will undertake several actions to improve agency management of its trail program in the short- and long-term. Note that the ability to implement these actions is dependent on the availability of future funding.

- A. The Forest Service will focus on identifying how to build capacity to address the existing maintenance backlog. This will include exploring options for convening representatives of trails groups, environmental groups, and other interested parties to work collaboratively in the development of ideas on how to close the gap and move towards sustainable trails. A key outcome of the collaboration will be to identify a range of short- and long-term options for narrowing the gap, with a focus on all aspects of trails management. The agency will conduct a rapid assessment of trail program needs and available resources to establish a baseline that will be utilized to measure success in reducing the gap. The assessment will build upon and supplement the analysis already conducted by GAO using readily available information at the national programmatic level and will be completed during FY 2014. Periodic review of successes will be conducted to determine how effective the utilized options are in reducing the gap. During this effort, information will be made readily available and shared with the public. By calendar year (CY) 2016, based on consideration of internal and external input and review of the successes to reduce the gap, the Forest Service will develop a national strategy for a sustainable trail program. During the interim, while the strategy is being developed, the agency will explore implementing measures to ensure that no net increase in total trail miles occurs.
- B. Since 2004, and resulting from the Forest Service's response to the recommendation in GAO's 1989 *Maintenance and Reconstruction Backlog on National Forest Trails Report* (GAO/RCED-89-182), the agency has made substantial improvements in trail

management with the implementation of a standardized approach for identifying trail-specific management objectives that document the management intent for each trail and incorporate sustainable design principles. This emphasis, supported by policy guidance and agency-wide training, has resulted in over 60 percent of National Forest System trails currently having documented Trail Management Objectives which are used as a basis for trail design, maintenance, reconstruction and management. The Forest Service will identify a schedule for meeting the agency's requirement to document Trail Management Objectives for all remaining National Forest System trails.

The Forest Service continues to build upon this foundational work and intends to take three steps in response to GAO's recommendation. By FY 2015, the agency will develop criteria defining a sustainable trail and trail program, which can be refined by units to reflect local circumstances. Beginning in FY 2015, with full implementation by FY 2017, the agency will develop and provide training to enhance sustainable trail design development, and maintenance skills for agency staff, volunteers, and partners. By CY 2017, the agency will identify actions that can be taken to facilitate accomplishment of unit-level trail assessments, with a focus on collaborative planning and "right-sizing" the trails system for social, environmental, and financial sustainability.

GAO Recommendation

To improve the agency's ability to keep up with its maintenance goals in the short term and reduce its maintenance backlog, the agency should take the following two actions:

- C. Take steps to improve policies and procedures related to trail maintenance. Such steps should include implementing electronic collection of trail condition data and offering more standardized in-person training on trail skills and on-the-ground maintenance. They could also include, for example, changing policies and practices to improve recruitment and retention of employees with trail expertise.
- D. Recognizing the importance of volunteers for trail maintenance, take steps to improve management of volunteers, including by ensuring that collaboration with and management of volunteers are clear expectations of trails staff and offering relevant training.

USDA Response

The Forest Service will undertake several actions to improve the agency's ability to keep up with its maintenance goals in the short term and to reduce its maintenance backlog. Note that the ability to implement these actions is dependent on the availability of future funding.

- C. The Forest Service will evaluate and implement, within agency authorities and consistent with resource management goals and objectives, applicable changes in policies and procedures to improve agency trail maintenance efforts and skills. The agency will evaluate its current data management practices, needs, and technologies to identify options for trails data collection and management that are more efficient, user-friendly,

and responsive to the evolving needs of the agency, volunteers, and our visitors. This assessment will incorporate the findings from the agency's responses to GAO Recommendations A and B, and will be completed during FY 2015. One aspect of this will include the implementation of electronic collection of trail condition data.

A prototype for the electronic collection of trail condition data will be released in CY 2013, followed by subsequent refinement and enhancement as identified during the data management evaluation.

By CY 2015, the Forest Service will also assess and identify actions to improve recruitment and retention of employees with technical and professional trail management skills. This will include providing nationally standardized training on trail design, condition assessment, and on-the-ground construction and maintenance by FY 2017. This will be synchronized with the sustainable trail design training efforts mentioned in response to GAO's Recommendation B. Options will be considered to help build a career track and enhance the professionalism and career recognition of trail managers, including a potential trails certification program. Additionally, the agency will explore methods to assist local managers in most effectively utilizing employee recruitment and retention options to meet these objectives, while retaining local management hiring flexibility that is adaptive to budget realities (for example, seasonal versus permanent fulltime positions).

- D. The Forest Service will identify issues regarding the agency's internal capacity to engage and leverage volunteer resources by CY 2015. Key in this effort will be utilization of executive line officers to help strategically evaluate barriers and assist with developing options for elimination of those barriers. For example, this will include consideration of issues surrounding volunteer-related organizational structure and workman's compensation. Identified options will be considered and may result in associated changes in agency guidance and training. In addition, skills specific to management of the volunteer and partnership program will be integrated with the training effort mentioned in USDA Response C.