

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service: Report on Public Access

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Forest Service Recreation Mission

With more and more of America living in urban environments, the importance of access to our public lands has never been greater. Urban areas are growing at nearly six times the rate of rural areas, putting increased pressure on nearby recreation sites. Potentially, more than 100 million additional people will be participating in outdoor recreation by 2060.

According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring Results Summary Report, published in 2012, recreation visitors contribute over \$11 billion to the national economy, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the Forest Service's contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product. The direct visitor spending, combined with the ripple effects in the nearby economies, sustains over 194,000 full- and part-time jobs. The vast majority of these jobs are in gateway communities, providing access to public lands and services to the many millions of Americans who visit them each year.

National Forest System (NFS) lands support over 5,000 outfitters and guides, many of which are small businesses providing jobs and income. These permittees provide access to public lands, which many people would not otherwise have. Their continued stability and presence creates tourism-oriented identities for the local areas in which they operate.

Hunting, Fishing and Recreational Shooting, and Travel Management

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of public lands. Population growth and increasingly limited public access to privately owned land contribute to high demand for quality recreation opportunities on NFS lands. Consistent with the goals of the America's Great Outdoors (AGO) initiative, land acquisition and exchange programs maintain the integrity of undeveloped lands and prevent their conversion to incompatible uses. The Forest Service's travel management policy requires each national forest and grassland to designate roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use and complete new motor vehicle use maps (MVUMs). As of the end of fiscal year (FY) 2013, approximately 82 percent of NFS administrative units had completed route and area designations for motor vehicle use. Although the completion of MVUMs has taken longer than anticipated, increased public involvement and collaboration has helped reduce appeals and litigation. The agency continues to increase efforts to involve the public in earlier decision making and works collaboratively to ensure that the public's concerns are addressed to the fullest extent prior to finalizing MVUMs.

The Federal Lands Hunting, Fishing, and Shooting Sports Roundtable (Roundtable) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) unites 42 national non-government organizations and Federal land management agencies in an aggressive effort titled "*Making Public Lands Public*," which identifies access needs and opportunities to meet these needs. The Roundtable and Tread Lightly!, a not-for-profit organization committed to minimizing the impact our recreational activities have on natural resources, are jointly sponsoring a national cooperative effort for educating the public about responsible recreational shooting on public lands. This project is an

attempt to curb irresponsible behavior, and make recreating on Forest Service lands safer, encouraging public use and enjoyment.

The Forest Service maintains an “open unless closed” policy for recreational shooting on NFS lands. It is estimated that over 90 percent of NFS lands are open to recreational shooting. We align with State law where regulations pertain to recreational shooting outside of hunting seasons. Closures are pursued when there is a direct threat to public safety or resource protection. Permanent closures follow the National Environmental Policy Act process with public involvement.

Increasing Access for Recreation Purposes through Land Acquisition

The primary funding mechanism the Forest Service uses to acquire land is the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). LWCF authorizes the Forest Service to acquire lands that are “primarily of value for outdoor recreation purposes.” Projects selected for LWCF funding take into consideration public support and coordination with Tribes, State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and public interest groups. These projects often originate with hunting and fishing advocacy organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and the Wild Sheep Foundation, who leverage funding for the acquisition and restoration of the land.

Acquisitions through LWCF are an excellent investment for the public because of the recreational opportunities created and because of the long-term management cost savings they provide. Consolidating Federal ownership allows the agency to better manage wildlife, prevent wildfire risks, secure public access, and protect invaluable water supplies. The Forest Service has purchased from willing sellers hundreds of thousands of acres of new recreation opportunities and created access to previously inaccessible areas of the national forests. In FY 2013 alone, the Forest Service acquired over 62,000 acres through the LWCF. These acquisitions included trail segments or stream, river, and lake frontage—all designed to provide or protect recreational access. Some of the LWCF projects, like the recent Lady C Ranch acquisition on the Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota, were designed to conserve range habitat for large game species. The project facilitated public access to four square miles of previously inaccessible land for walk-in elk hunting. Other projects, like the 12,500-acre John Day River Headwaters project on the Malheur National Forest in Oregon, protect water quality and instream flows for one of the few remaining exclusively wild runs of spring Chinook salmon and summer steelhead in the world.

Other Actions Supporting Access

Digital Access

In addition to improving physical access to the outdoors, access to information is important and expected by the public. In the past year, Forest Service websites have received nearly 90 million page views, with over 70 percent of visitors specifically looking for information about recreation opportunities.

To enhance the web experience and continue to meet the emerging needs of contemporary visitors, the Forest Service continues to expand digital access through virtual tours that allow

visitors to learn about national forests using their mobile devices before, during, or after a visit. National forests that have recently implemented virtual tours include the Wayne, Shawnee, and Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests. These efforts meet the objectives of the interagency National Travel and Tourism Strategy to enhance visitor services offered on public lands.

Our new Interactive Visitor Map includes all Forest Service recreation sites, roads, and trails on one easy-to-use, searchable map. In addition, improved data are available to the public, giving the public access to information on new products and services. Similar information is now on Recreation.gov, facilitating trip planning on the national forests and grasslands. Providing quality information in many different formats gives new visitors the confidence they need to venture out on our national forests and grasslands, and it expands access to those looking for opportunities to recreate in the outdoors.

2012 Planning Rule

The Forest Service continues to act on changes in the 2012 Planning Rule requiring that forest plans provide for sustainable recreation to improve access. The Rule also requires protection and appropriate management of wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, other designated areas, cultural and historic resources, and areas of Tribal importance. Forests and grasslands are in the process of revising and amending their plans to include these sustainable recreation foundations. As a requirement of the Rule, the public will be involved throughout all stages of planning.

Scenic Byways

The network of 138 National Forest Scenic Byways provides recreational, educational, and economic benefits to NFS visitors. The Forest Service continues to partner with the Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration, as well as States and communities, to support the designation, interpretation, protection, promotion, and infrastructure development of a system of outstanding touring routes through the country. Meeting the program goal of enhancing rural community tourism has been one of the most satisfying outcomes of byway designation.

MAP21

Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP21) Act is a \$300 million, multi-year investment strategy that demonstrates how our network of roads and trails supports high-use recreation and revenue-generating sites. Under MAP21's Federal Lands Access Program, we continue to improve transportation facilities that provide access to, are adjacent to, or are located within, the national forests, with an emphasis on high-use recreation sites and economic generators.

Public Outreach Through Wise Use of Recreation Fees

Where authorized under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), fees support recreation opportunities on forests and grasslands of origination. In FY 2013, the Forest Service collected over \$69 million in FLREA fees. These fees enable many forest and grassland sites to be open to the public and offer a range of unique recreational experiences that would not otherwise be available. FLREA funds are used to repair and maintain recreation facilities, provide visitor services on recreation sites, and fund law enforcement and security programs to protect recreation users and assets. Results from our National Visitor Use Monitoring survey

report that more than 85 percent of visitors who paid recreation fees report satisfaction with the value they receive for the fees paid.

As required by the FLREA, we involve the public in setting fees for recreation amenities. This process occurs at the local level with Forest Service managers soliciting input on fee pricing from recreation users. In addition, there are processes for public review and comment. Currently, recreation fees are reviewed by local Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRACs) established under guidelines in FLREA. These committees represent a cross section of recreation users, environmental groups, as well as State, local, and Tribal governments. RRACs advise and recommend to the agency the implementation, elimination, and expansion of fees and recreation fee programs. They also make recommendations based on public concerns.

Get Outdoors Day

The Forest Service, along with its community partners, annually hosts numerous Get Outdoors Day (GO Day) events to encourage outdoor recreation among typical and non-traditional visitors. GO Day is a fee-free day that engages Americans, especially youth, in recreation opportunities readily available in the Great Outdoors, and educates them on the physical, mental, and other benefits of an active outdoor lifestyle. The “Guide to America’s National Forests” will be produced for the second year, in collaboration with the National Forest Foundation and “Oh Ranger” American Park Network. The free publication highlights wilderness areas to help promote and celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act.

Interagency MOU with the Western States Tourism Policy Council

In 2014, the agency re-issued the MOU between the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Transportation, as well as the Western States Tourism Policy Council (WSTPC). These agencies and the WSTPC will continue to work together to achieve the common goals of advancing the domestic and international public’s awareness of travel and tourism on Federal lands, waters, and shores. Furthermore, this partnership will encourage and expand use of travel and tourism opportunities in an environmentally and culturally sensitive manner, using natural resources to produce long-term economic, business development, educational, and recreational benefits—especially in rural areas.