



Mismanaging the Mission: Weakening the Agency Responsible for our National Forests

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The Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (or MUSYA) authorizes and directs the Secretary of Agriculture to develop and administer the renewable resources of timber, range, water, recreation and wildlife on the national forests for multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services.

- Public Law 86-517 passed by the US Congress on June 12, 1960

“Unless we practice conservation, those who come after us will have to pay the price of misery, degradation, and failure for the progress and prosperity of our day.”

—Gifford Pinchot, first Director of the US Forest Service.

The United States Congress established the US Forest Service in 1905. Originally established to ensure quality water and timber production for the nation’s benefit. Congress expanded the direction and role of the US Forest Service in 1960 to “develop and administer the renewable resources of timber, range, water, recreation and wildlife on the national forests for multiple use and sustained yield” through the passing of the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960. The mission of the Forest Service is now to “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.”

However, the ability for the public servants who make up the Forest Service to meet the mission of the agency that is responsible for managing 193 million acres of National Forests and National Grasslands is being compromised through the chaotic and unscientific management of the agency under Secretary Brooke Rollins and the Trump administration.

Why it Matters

The US Forest Service has a duty to manage nearly 200 million acres of public lands to balance use of natural resources such as for timber and grazing, with ensuring access to fresh, clean water for our society, access to outdoor recreation, and habitat for wildlife. [The Forest Service is responsible for](#) 154 National Forests, 57,000 miles of streams of which 5,000 are designated Wild and Scenic, 7.2 million acres of wetlands, 158,000 miles of trails, 36.6 million acres of wilderness, over 4,000 campgrounds, and provides access to 122 ski areas. Forest Service lands produce [20% of America’s clean water](#) supply. And the agency must do so in the face of increasing temperatures and aridification due to climate change, continual battles against exotic invasive species, and greater visitation to Forest Service lands than ever before. Importantly, all these factors increase the risk of wildfire on our National Forests and Grasslands. Additionally, historic management included eliminating fire from forests to protect timber resources. This, along with the past removal of large fire-resistant trees and clear cutting has contributed to the “high fuel loads” of many National Forests.

Now, the Trump administration is using wildfire as a scapegoat and rationale to greatly and [immediately expand logging in the US](#), and [declaring 112 million acres of forest need to be logged](#) for wildfire prevention and national security and placed under “Emergency Authorization Determination”; at the same time, it is also slashing the agency’s workforce – those responsible for meeting the mission of the

Forest Service, controlling the impact of wildfires, providing access and safety for visitors, and protecting habitat for wildlife and biodiversity.

What's Happening

- **Staff Reductions:** Prior to the Trump Administration's arrival, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees the US Forest Service, [employed approximately 100,000 employees of which approximately 35,000 were Forest Service Employees](#) . According to [Secretary Brooke Rollins herself](#), at least 15,364 USDA employees voluntarily elected to take deferred resignations as of July 2025.

While it is unclear the exact number of these employees that were Forest Service employees, [we do know](#) that thousands of Forest Service employees were fired by the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, many of whom had to be reinstated by court order after it was deemed they were illegally fired. Many of these employees were subsequently put on paid administrative leave, given no work or did not return to work after accepting one of the deferred resignation options. Placing Federal employees on more than 10 workdays of administrative leave within any calendar year violates the Administrative Leave Act, but that fact has not deterred the Administration, which has abused such leave to sideline employees for months at a time.

However, on July 8th the [U.S. Supreme Court removed](#) a block on reductions in force (or RIFs) for most federal agencies and additional layoffs to staff are expected. We also know [at least 700 employees that were fired](#) at part of the "Valentine's Day Massacre" in February of 2025, were part of supporting wildfire management operations. Furthermore, of the 4,000 known Forest Service employees that accepted deferred resignations, some [1,600 were "red card" holders](#) also part of wildfire management teams.

From temporary workers to tenured senior level employees, staff across the US have been fired or voluntarily resigned or retired. Their roles and responsibilities include trail maintenance, customer service, permit administration and facilities management; Freedom of Information Act review staff, Forest Supervisors, engineers, rangers, meteorologist, firefighters, and fire captains...to name a few. And this is on top of many National Forests already being severely understaffed. Some National Forests had more than 50% of their positions already vacant.

- **Reorganization and Relocation:** On July 24th Department of Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins [proposed a reorganization of the Department](#) and subsequently called for the ["phasing out" of all of the Forest Service's nine Regional Offices](#) . Part of this plan includes [relocating much of the agency's Washington Office](#) out of D.C.

This plan will lead to additional staff reductions. The [Secretary fully admitted](#) her "best guess" is that 30-50% of agency headquarters staff that will be asked to relocate won't do so. This would be an additional loss of approximately 1,500 to 2,300 employees. This same tactic was employed during the first Trump Administration, and it led to an exodus of staff at that time, especially for Bureau of Land Management employees. Another reorganization and relocation will further

curtail the ability of the Forest Service to uphold its' mission. There seems to be no consideration for how forced relocation will impact fire management or how staff will conduct congressionally mandated work including upholding National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA) analysis, or tribal consultation. It is easy to speculate that perhaps that is the goal.

- **Hiring Freeze:** Despite the claims of the [US Forest Service “meeting or even exceeding hiring goals”](#) cuts to Forest Service staff have left the agency weakened in their ability to protect the public. Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz has admitted that “demand for resources outpaces their availability” and the 2025 fire season was going to be “extremely challenging” for the agency. According to [data obtained by ProPublica](#), of the 4,500 firefighting related jobs that were eliminated, some 27% or 1,215 jobs remain vacant as of July 2025 even though the reorganization plan says that these types of positions will not be affected. Just in California “26% of engine captain positions and 42% of engineer positions were vacant.” Riva Duncan, a retired Forest Service fire chief and the vice president of Grassroots Wildland Firefighters publicly noted “We have engines that are completely unstaffed” and “We have vacant positions in fire management”.

“It's... important for people to understand how long it will take to repair and recover. Trees grow slow. Research takes time. It's so easy to tear things down and so hard to build them back again.”

—Anonymous Forest Service Staff

Impacts

- **Ability to Fight Wildfires:** While fire is a natural part of most ecosystems, there is a need to reduce the impacts of wildfire on human infrastructure and natural resources sensitive to larger, overly hot fires. Yet, the Forest Service is eliminating key personnel that are necessary to appropriately respond to wildfires. While frontline firefighters have been lost, staff have also been lost that provide for firefighting technical needs, logistical needs, safety needs, tactical needs, that provide access to equipment, and that coordinate access to resources. Even if all fire fighter positions were staffed, without the support staff the agency cannot successfully manage their fire response operations. With links in the chain of command of wildfire response now vacant the public and resources are now in greater danger.
- **Mismanagement and Resource Damage:** With a reduced staff there are simply not enough personnel to properly protect our National Forests from damage that comes with unregulated use. A reduction in planning personnel and resource specialists who know the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process will result in **less efficient NEPA** process which directly counters the [administration's desire to reduce NEPA timelines](#). Similarly, lack of personnel could lead to violations of NHPA, ESA and other legal requirements, leading to **more litigation** for the

Forest Service and reduced efficiency. The loss of staff will also lead to more projects with **reduced oversight**. For example, more Forest Service logging projects are being carried out through “designation by description” (DxD) or “designation by prescription” (DxP) allowing the logging companies themselves to choose the timber for a logging project putting the fox in charge of the hen house. WildEarth Guardians has [already identified](#) instances where DxP contracts lead to too many trees being cut, and not enough large trees being left.

Additionally, the Forest Service oversees the single largest network of roads in the world; over 370,000 miles. For years there has been a **backlog of billions of dollars of road maintenance** that is required for Forest Service Roads (USDA Forest Service. 2019. FY2020 Budget Justification. P.83).. Fewer resources and fewer personnel will result in further deterioration of roads and culverts leading to increased runoff and damage to water and fish and aquatic resources and an increase the potential for landslides. There will also be less enforcement to keep people from going off roads, creating new [roads which impact wildlife habitat and increase the potential for human caused wildfires](#).

Currently the Forest Service has a significant **backlog of grazing permits** lacking NEPA review, with over half of the allotments operating for over 20 years without evaluation—leaving the ecological impacts of continued livestock grazing on water quality, native vegetation, and wildlife habitat largely unexamined. Staff reductions and changes in priority will only exacerbate this issue.

- **Human Safety:** Forest Supervisors nationwide, including Scott Fitzwilliams, former Forest Supervisor for the White River National Forest in Colorado, have noted the increase in visitation to National Forests nationwide, with a [key spike in visitation to the backcountry](#). More and more people are looking to get away and explore public lands. However, the reduction in Forest Service work force means there are fewer personnel and resources [for trail construction and maintenance](#), for recreation facility management and safety (e.g. emergency response, water and wastewater systems) and for law enforcement for things like fire-ban implementation or illegal off-road vehicle use.

Even sanitation is an issue. Those that help keep bathrooms clean are the backbone of providing a good and healthy experience for visitors. Without these staff, or at a minimum fewer of these staff, there is greater potential for [improper human waste disposal](#) to affect the health, safety and experience of visitors to our National Forests.

- **Education and Visitor Services:** Ranger Stations across the country are closing their doors, either completely or early. The Sawtooth National Recreation Area headquarters in Ketchum, Idaho and the Stanley Ranger Station were [temporarily closed, and then only open three days a week for much of the summer](#). Additionally, frontline and customer service staff have been let go or moved to other positions. The loss of these service makes it harder for the public to understand the importance of the resources and ecology of given National Forest lands, know the rules and regulation as to not damage resources, and to be informed citizen caretakes of our public lands. We know that when people know, understand and connect with something,

including our natural resources, they tend to care for and act in support of those resources. This administration is meticulously breaking the bonds of the American people to our American lands.

- **Economic Impacts:** Each year visitors to National Forest lands contribute some [\\$13 billion dollars to economy](#). Much of this money is spent in gateway communities that surround National Forest lands. Businesses including restaurants and hotels are supported by visitors to these public lands. Additionally, many of the staff that work for local Forest Service Ranger districts live in these small communities. The loss of jobs for these people means fewer dollars being spent in small American towns and trickle-down poverty.
- **Reducing Public Support for the Forest Service:** Breaking the bonds of the citizens to their public lands appears to be one of the goals of the administration. As demonstrated by efforts of this administration and the Republican led Congress to “dispose” of public lands, **an effort is underway to undermine the American public’s faith by discrediting the entities responsible for the management of our public resources**. If people believe the government can’t manage these resources and they would be better managed by private entities or the states, the public will support transfers of our forests. We expect corporations and developers would then be able to control the use and potential exploitation of these lands.

We are already seeing the breaking of bonds between the [Forest Service and many universities](#). As the Forest Service reduces scientific collaboration with universities, the ability for the agency to develop and implement sound science for wildlife, wildfire and forest management is reduced. This increases the potential for science to be cherry-picked and the positions of those in power to not be refuted. Relatedly, the reduction in collaboration between the Forest Service and universities is modifying the pipeline of future Forest Service employees, decreasing access to future recruits who are trained and knowledgeable in their field.

Forest Service staff are facing constant threats; to their livelihoods through possible layoffs or threats of firing if information is [shared with the media](#) or the public, where they are positioned, and even what their job may entail. Reducing resources and personnel is making it impossible for staff to be effective and is [a source of frustration](#) for staff. [Federal News Network](#) recently conducted a survey of federal employees and found workers had high levels of anxiety, chronic insomnia, and depression, and such conditions were affecting morale and productivity in the workplace and at home. Forest Service staff have shared that “It is paralyzing for people to try and work in such fear and stress - which ends up further reducing the ability of us to deliver on the mission.” [And people tend to not stay in jobs when they don’t enjoy their job](#), and have low morale. Just ask those tens of thousands of people who have already left government agencies through deferred resignations. The loss of institutional knowledge by those that have left or will leave will be felt deeply by the agency for years to come; more so if that knowledge is replaced by suspect science and industry operatives whose interests may contradict the mission of the Forest Service and laws encumbered to it to uphold.

They say they support wildland firefighting, but then they disparage all of the civil servants who are out there and create an environment where it's not the least bit appealing to go and work for the federal government. How do they expect these things to work out?"

—Jacob Malcolm, former director of the Interior department's Office of Policy Analysis, in [High Country News](#)

Take Action!

The public commenting period on the proposed reorganization of the USFS is open until September 30, 2025!

Tell the U.S. Department of Agriculture to respect and protect Forest Service employees!

The health of our forests, wildlife, fisheries, and water resources depends on their continued work and presence. Our national forests, regional offices, and science centers are far too important to be abandoned.

Send your comments to Secretary Rollins at: reorganization@usda.gov

[Sign the PEER petition](#)

"If you're somebody that likes to recreate on them (public lands), that cares about being able to take your kid out and just be out in these really remote, beautiful places, then you should be pretty concerned right now."

—Bryce Spare, former Payette National Forest Ranger in [Idaho Statesman](#)
