



Washington Trails Association

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Statement of Jill Simmons, Executive Director, Washington Trails Association
Before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Regarding Recreation Infrastructure on Federal Lands

March 21, 2017

Executive Summary

- Washington Trails Association is the nation's largest state-based trail maintenance and hiking advocacy nonprofit organization with more than 15,000 member households.
- 54 percent of Washington state residents go for a hike each year¹; 72 percent of Washington state residents participate in outdoor activities that take place on or involve trails.²
- Outdoor recreation drives \$646 billion nationally in annual consumer spending, employing 6.1 million Americans and contributing \$39.9 billion in federal taxes and \$39.7 billion in state and local taxes.³
- A Government Accountability Office report describes how the Forest Service's trail system, one of the primary ways people access federal lands, has an incredible backlog of trail maintenance needs. The GAO estimates the "trail maintenance backlog to be \$314 million in fiscal year 2012, with an additional \$210 million for annual maintenance, capital improvement, and operations."
- For nearly 25 years, Washington Trails Association has led volunteer trail maintenance on federal, state and local public lands in Washington state, resulting in more than 1.6 million hours of donated work by more than 28,000 volunteers. The value of this volunteer labor is equal to a \$32 million investment in recreation infrastructure on public lands.
- Washington Trails Association believes public-nonprofit partnerships, like our volunteer trail maintenance program, are key to reducing the infrastructure backlog on federal lands, but volunteers cannot do it alone. In order to increase our volunteer trail work, there must be additional investment in land management agencies to address the maintenance backlog for trails, campgrounds and access roads on federal lands.
- Washington Trails Association stands ready to leverage increased federal investment in recreation infrastructure on federal lands with the sweat equity of our thousands of volunteers who are eager to help steward the places they love.
- The Administration's proposed budget takes us in the wrong direction, exacerbating chronic agency underfunding. Budget cuts to the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture will have a negative impact on trail users and the agencies trying to manage our public lands.

¹ http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/rec_trends/2013-2018SCORP-FullRpt.pdf

² http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/rcfb/2013-2018Trails_Plan&Appendices.pdf

³ <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/the-outdoor-recreation-economy-2012>

Introduction

Good morning Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of recreation infrastructure on federal lands. My name is Jill Simmons and I am the Executive Director at Washington Trails Association.

Founded in 1966, Washington Trails Association (WTA) is the nation's largest state-based trail maintenance and hiking advocacy nonprofit organization with more than 15,000 member households. Washington Trails Association's mission is to preserve, enhance and promote hiking opportunities in Washington state through collaboration, education, advocacy and volunteer trail maintenance. Each year more than 4,700 Washington Trails Association volunteers perform 150,000 hours of trail maintenance across Washington. That equates to \$3.9 million in donated labor to our public lands annually. More than 50 percent of the 150,000 hours of volunteer trail maintenance is provided on federal lands, including national forests and parks.

In addition to the on-the-ground impact on trails, Washington Trails Association's reach is profound. We have an expansive website with trail suggestions and trip reports. Each year more than 4.5 million people go to Washington Trails Association's website in search of recreation opportunities and the chance to protect wild places for their children's children. This incredible number reflects the fact that 54 percent of Washington state residents go for a hike each year.⁴ Through Washington Trails Association's online trip reports, our dedicated community tells us about their hiking experiences, regularly highlighting the need to invest in our federal lands, create more equitable access to the outdoors and preserve quality hiking experiences.

Washington Trails Association's community extends to partnerships with organizations around the state and nation. We work closely with our federal land managers – namely the United States Forest Service and National Park Service – to build and maintain sustainable trail systems. We also work with the recreation industry, such as outdoor retailer REI, to invest in our wild places and the recreation economy.

Washington state is rapidly growing. Our state population was 4.1 million in 1980.⁵ Today it has nearly doubled to approximately 7.3 million and is estimated to grow to 9.1 million by 2040.⁶ With this growth comes increased demand for outdoor recreation opportunities. In recent years, our federal land management partners have seen a dramatic increase in the number of visitors to their lands, including on trails.

The trend of growing visitorship and use of the National Forest System for recreation can be seen across the country. Since 1977, the number of recreation visitor days on national forest trails has increased 376 percent.⁷ And, the Forest Service has reported that recreation is by far the single greatest use of the National Forest System.⁸ Recreation and visitor spending on national forests contributes \$13 billion to the economy annually and provides 205,000 jobs.⁹

Washington Trails Association believes that a thriving future for Washington state, and the rest of the nation, will come from embracing recreation not only as a way of life but also as a key economic driver. In fact, recreation already has a significant economic impact, which will only increase as more people get outside to enjoy our public lands.

⁴ http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/rec_trends/2013-2018SCORP-FullRpt.pdf

⁵ <https://www.census.gov>

⁶ <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/pop/forecasts.asp>

⁷ USDA Forest Service. *Fiscal Year 2013 President's Budget*

⁸ USDA Forest Service. *A Sustainable Recreation Future. Draft 12/16/2015. Page 1.*

⁹ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2016/06/17/forest-service-makes-it-easier-visitors-enjoy-national-forests-and>

The Recreation Economy in Washington State & Nationally

Whether a lifelong Washingtonian or a newcomer to the state, hiking and outdoor recreation is a key part of their identity for many Washingtonians. The mountains not only lure individuals interested in a weekend adventure, they also call to the technology industry transplants and small business startups to set up shop and make Washington home. Beyond attracting new talent and businesses to our state, the recreation economy in Washington generates \$21.6 billion in annual consumer spending and \$2 billion in state and local tax revenue. Additionally, nearly 200,000 Washington residents are employed thanks to the recreation economy.¹⁰ These economic benefits reach every county of our state.

Many rural towns in Washington are nestled against the boundaries of our national forests and parks. These “gateway communities” rely on outdoor recreation visitors spending money on food, gas, lodging and gear. Washington communities such as Darrington, Bellingham, Winthrop, Skykomish and Trout Lake see recreation as crucial to sustaining their livelihoods.

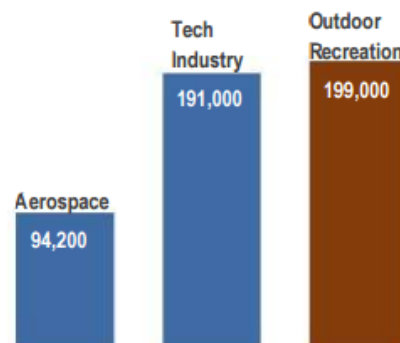
For example, the town of Trout Lake, Washington, is at the base of Mount Adams and next to the Yakama Nation. In 2015, catastrophic fires destroyed miles of trail and wildlands on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The community of Trout Lake felt the loss of visitors and the recreation tourism economy in the aftermath of the fires. This year Washington Trails Association, local community groups and the Yakama Nation are working together to open trails and spark renewed interest in this beautiful region of Washington state. As popular trails reopen on federal lands with Washington Trails Association’s help, the town of Trout Lake expects to see its tourism numbers rebound as hikers and campers stop by for the famous huckleberry milkshakes at the local gas station. And the story of this community is not unique. There are thousands of “Trout Lakes” across Washington state and the rest of the nation.

The value of the recreation economy can also be seen on a national scale. Outdoor recreation drives \$646 billion in annual consumer spending, employing 6.1 million Americans and contributing \$39.9 billion in federal taxes and \$39.7 billion in state and local taxes.¹¹

A good example of the purchasing power of outdoor enthusiasts can be seen by recent earnings from REI, a Washington-based and nationally recognized outdoor retailer. The retailer reported annual revenues of \$2.56 billion in 2016, a 5.5 percent increase over 2015. REI recognizes the necessity of investing in our public lands, as illustrated by annual donations of millions of dollars to support efforts nationwide to build and maintain trails, clean up beaches and restore local parks.

While REI is a great example of the purchasing power of the outdoor retail economy, many more examples are bound to come to light thanks to the passage late last year of the “Outdoor REC Act.” The new federal law will ensure that, for the first time, the outdoor recreation economy is counted as part of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product. This change will provide new measures of the impact outdoor recreation has on the overall U.S. economy. Washington Trails Association believes that the numbers will demonstrate conclusively that investing

Jobs in Washington



Sources: Washington Aerospace Partnership, 2012; TechAmerica Foundation, 2012; Washington Recreation and Conservation Office, 2015.

¹⁰ <http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/ORTF/EconomicAnalysisOutdoorRec.pdf>

¹¹ <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/the-outdoor-recreation-economy-2012>

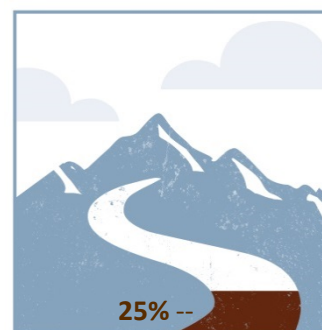
in trails, campgrounds, and access roads on federal lands is an investment in a significant and growing economic driver.

In fact, without investments in infrastructure, such as trails and recreational access roads on our public lands, we run the risk of diminishing recreation's economic impact. Trail maintenance backlogs in the hundreds of millions of dollars mean that people soon may no longer be able to visit their favorite lake or mountain vista. And without that hike to draw them, they will not stop for a meal at the mom-and-pop burger joints that are scattered throughout the gateway communities in Washington state and around the country.

Federal Lands Recreation Infrastructure and Chronic Underfunding

For more than 20 years, federal land budgets have been chronically underfunded. This underfunding has decreased land management agencies' resources and staffing and, therefore, their ability to maintain trails, campgrounds, recreational road access and other recreation infrastructure.

In 2013, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) produced a report outlining the negative impacts of the maintenance backlog on United States Forest Service trails. Forest Service data show that national forests receive about 165 million visits each year, 40 percent of which are visitors coming to hike on trails. The report describes how the Forest Service's trail system, one of the primary ways people access federal lands, has an incredible backlog of trail maintenance. The report estimated the value of the Forest Service "trail maintenance backlog to be \$314 million in fiscal year 2012, with an additional \$210 million for annual maintenance, capital improvement, and operations." One of the most startling revelations in the report was that the Forest Service has only been able to keep a quarter of its 158,000 miles of recreational trails up to the agency's standards.¹² Due to the lack of adequate funding in the five years since the report was published, the backlog of maintenance needs has undoubtedly increased.



Only 25% of Forest Service trails are maintained to standard, creating unsafe trails and loss of access to hikers and other trail users.

Similarly, the National Park Service has reported an infrastructure repair backlog estimated at \$11.9 billion (FY 2015). This estimate includes vital repairs to aging historical structures and thousands of miles of roads and trails, bridges, tunnels, sewers, drainage and other infrastructure. Trail infrastructure needs, such as placing crucial footbridges over rivers and fixing trail-closing washouts, are estimated at \$482 million.

At a time when visitation to our public lands is at an all-time high, this cycle of chronic underfunding cannot continue. Land management agencies cannot see their budgets further reduced. But that is exactly what the Trump Administration's budget proposal does — a 12 percent cut to the Department of Interior, home to our National Park Service, and an even greater 21 percent cut to the Department of Agriculture, which manages our national forests. These cuts will only deepen the maintenance backlog issues on our federal lands, resulting in trail closures, washed out roads and shuttered ranger stations.

¹² <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/655555.pdf>

The Need for Investment

Due to dwindling resources and staffing, federal land management agencies have increasingly relied on partner organizations, such as Washington Trails Association. As an organization that has led more than 1.6 million volunteer hours on trails in Washington state involving more than 28,000 volunteers (totaling \$32 million in donated labor), Washington Trails Association values these partnerships. We are committed to caring for our public lands, but our volunteers cannot do it alone.

Washington Trails Association will continue to work hard to chip away at the backlog of maintenance needs, but we rely on federal support to make our volunteer trail maintenance programs work. Washington Trails Association and other organizations that conduct maintenance on federal lands receive government grants to fund, in part, our trail work. We leverage those dollars significantly through private funding and volunteer hours to have an even greater impact. As an example, since 1996, the federal Recreational Trails Program (funded through the transportation budget) has contributed more than \$2.3 million to Washington Trails Association's volunteer trail projects. Coupling this investment in these projects with our volunteers' donated time valued at about \$9 million, the total investment going into federal lands is worth nearly \$12 million. Imagine the impact we could have if additional investments were made to improve and expand recreation infrastructure and support volunteer trail maintenance programs on federal lands.

In addition, in order for community organizations to effectively work on federal lands, there must be adequate staffing within land management agencies and sufficient construction and maintenance budgets to facilitate the on-the-ground efforts of our volunteers. From expertise on federal regulations to site-specific knowledge of preferred use and management policies, federal employees are vital to the success of volunteer work on public lands. Further, there are critical projects that cannot be carried out by volunteers, such as the installation of major bridges, but that are needed to get to other places on federal lands where volunteers can do the work.

Washington Trails Association has been partnering with the Forest Service and National Park Service for nearly 25 years. During this time our expertise has grown along with our volunteer hours of service. Some people think that trail work is as simple as shoveling a little dirt, but we understand it is much more complex, which is why these agencies trust us to perform well. And Washington Trails Association is not alone; many other nonprofit organizations have also answered the call to help care for our public lands, including Back Country Horsemen of Washington, Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, Pacific Crest Trail Association and Washington Conservation Corps, to name a few.

Together, we are answering the call for increased volunteerism on federal lands highlighted in the National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act, which passed into law late last year. And we stand ready to do so again in response to increased federal investment in recreation infrastructure. We will leverage those investments many times over by bringing the sweat equity of the many trail users who want to help care for the places they love.

With increased support, we are confident that together we can create the trail and recreation system that is being demanded by the millions of visitors to our public lands. In turn, this will foster Washington state's and local communities' outdoor recreation economies, keeping them competitive and sustainable in this rapidly changing world.

This concludes my testimony. I thank the Committee for providing me this opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.