



United States Department of Agriculture

National *Strategy* for a Sustainable Trail System



Forest Service FS-1095b November 2017



Cover. Tonto National Forest, Arizona (Courtesy photo by Simon Cox)

Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest, Utah (Forest Service photo)

Message From the Chief

The Forest Service manages the largest trail system in the country, with unparalleled opportunities for people to discover their favorite path to the Great Outdoors! Trails connect—they connect people with each other, with themselves, with their community, with their heritage, with their future, and with their public lands.

Trails benefit individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. People of all ages and abilities can get outside, have fun, and explore trails on their public lands, and they can also help care for them. Doing all these things adds to the spiritual, mental, and physical health and well-being of people who use and enjoy their public lands. Trails also generate prosperity for the Nation: visitors to the national forests and grasslands spend over \$9 billion annually, and outdoor recreation and tourism supports 143,000 jobs.

Our role at the Forest Service is to sustain a vibrant and healthy system of trails, both now and for generations to come. Our goal is to ensure America's trails are ecologically sustainable and economically viable and that people value and support their trails on public lands. To achieve our goal, we are increasingly embracing and building upon the innovation and energy of partners, volunteers, friends, agency leaders, and employees—seeking out new relationships and new solutions.

With the passage of the *National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act* in November 2016, the time for bold solutions is now. We can harness the energy, talent, and resources of the trails community by sharing stewardship—by making trails and trail management a

collective priority. Based on input from trail enthusiasts and from Forest Service employees across the country, we have identified six areas of action for expanding our capacity and improving our ways of thinking and doing. Taking bold action in each of these areas will broaden and strengthen our approach and lead us toward collectively delivering and stewarding a sustainable system of trails.



Tony Tooke, Chief of the Forest Service

We have already begun to push beyond how we traditionally think about, manage, and deliver access to public lands. This strategy aligns with the *USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan: FY 2015–2020* and builds upon the agency's Framework for Sustainable Recreation. Forest Service program guidance also emphasizes the trails strategy as an integral part of high-leverage action areas for offering premier outdoor experiences.

Over the next several years, we will embody these principles and carry out the actions outlined in this document to achieve a system of sustainable trails. Join us! Together, we can ensure a lasting trails legacy for generations to come.

TONY TOOKE
Chief

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Tooke".

Areas of Action:

1

Leader Intent: Cultivate leadership desire for and commitment to a sustainable trail system.

2

Organization and Talent: Leverage an expanded and combined workforce to increase stewardship capacity.

3

Relevancy: Connect with diverse communities and trail users.

4

Sustainable Systems: Collaboratively create and achieve a common vision.

5

Agency Processes and Culture: Maximize opportunities for effective partnering and trail stewardship.

6

Information: Provide readily available, up-to-date, and credible trail information.





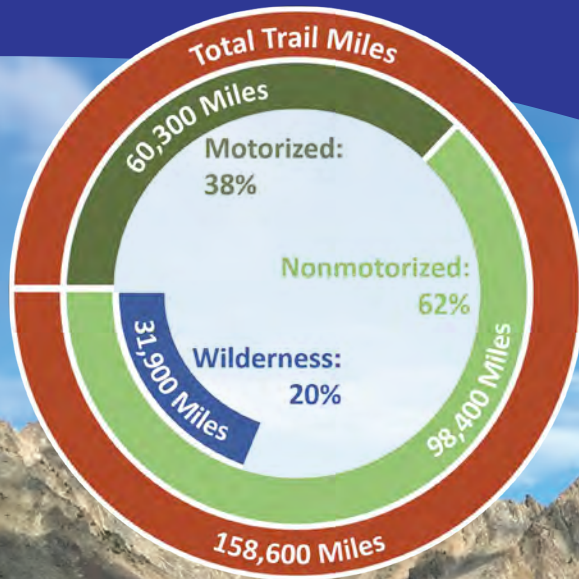
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Trails connect people with each other, their community, their heritage, and their public lands through an outstanding, valued, and sustainable system of trails.

—Trails Connect! National Initiative launched by the Forest Service in 2014



World-Class System of Trails

- ▶ 158,600 miles of motorized and nonmotorized trails:
 - ▶▶ 31,900 miles in designated wilderness
 - ▶▶ 10,000 miles of national scenic, historic, and recreation trails
- ▶ 84 million people annually recreate on National Forest System trails

Major Economic Contribution of Recreation on National Forests and Grasslands

- ▶ 143,000 jobs annually supported by recreation and tourism spending
- ▶ More than \$9 billion in annual visitor spending



Custer-Gallatin National Forest, Montana (Courtesy photo by Karl Birkehead)

A Need for Change

The Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is committed to caring for the land and serving people by connecting them with their public lands. Well-located and well-cared-for trails are a vital way for visitors and communities to reach and explore these lands and enjoy the multiple health, wellness, and economic benefits of outdoor recreation. The agency embraces its leadership role as a community member, shared steward, and key provider of access to public lands.

Together with partners, volunteers, and friends, the Forest Service manages more than 158,000 miles of nonmotorized and motorized trails—the largest managed system of trails in the country. More than 84 million people recreate on National Forest System trails annually, and more than 230 million people live within 100 miles of a national forest or grassland. National Forest System trails also connect with many miles of trails managed by local, state, federal, and tribal governments and by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Drawing from these valued partner resources now and into the future, the Forest Service will increasingly embrace a shared-stewardship approach in providing and managing a sustainable system of trails.



Flathead National Forest, Montana (Forest Service photo by Roy Jacobson)



Achieving a sustainable trail system presents several challenges. With limited funding, compounded by the rising cost of wildfire operations and the associated decrease of nearly 40 percent in nonfire personnel, the Forest Service faces a lack of capacity for managing trails on the ground and for building partnership synergies within the trails community. Additionally, visitor use is growing on many national forests and grasslands, current and potential trail users are searching for more diverse experiences, and many people are disconnected from nature due to an increased focus on technology and digital devices. The Forest Service must embrace these changes and refocus the way the agency connects people to their public lands.

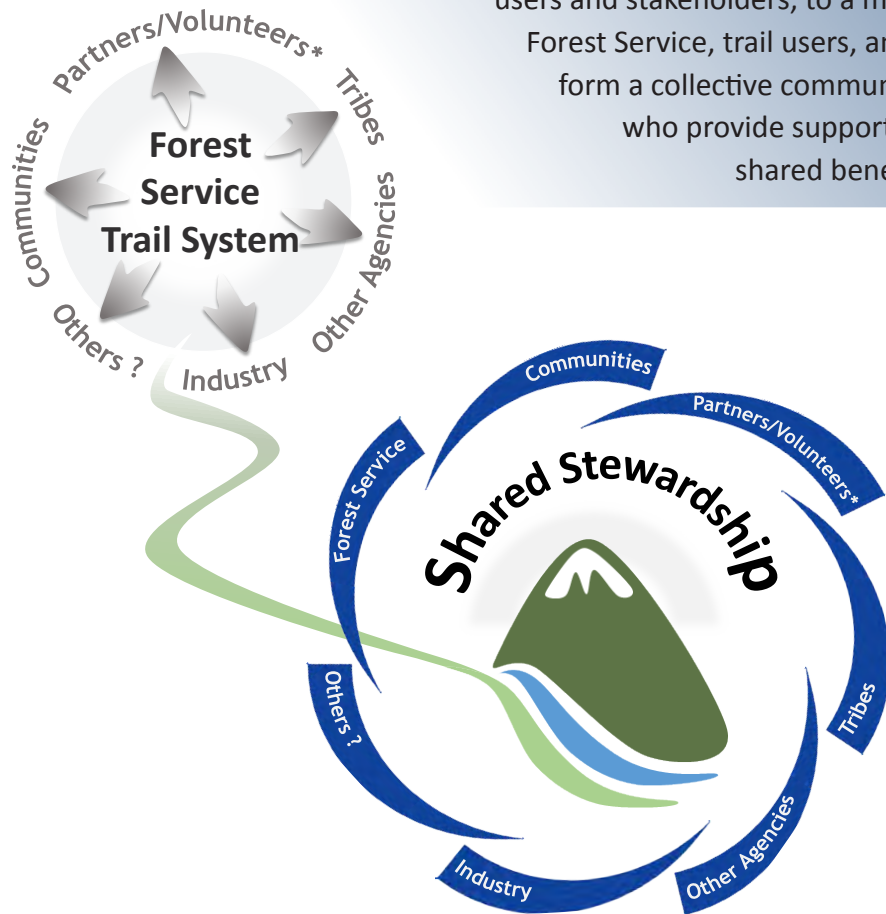
To shift from an unsustainable trail system to a sustainable one, the Forest Service will empower shared stewardship within the trails community to invest in these world-class and diverse trails. A generation ago, nearly every ranger district had its own trail crew, but that is no longer the case. The Forest Service will overcome a significant reduction in field staff by moving from a model of “doing it all” to a model of shared stewardship in order to achieve mutual goals and receive shared benefits.

The *National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System* establishes a set of core values that will guide the behaviors and efforts of the agency and its partners. It also commits the Forest Service to take action in six different areas to meet the challenges of achieving a sustainable trail system. These actions will be reflected in the agency’s annual program of work, and successes will be tracked by the Forest Service’s National Trails Board and in collaboration with partners.

The Forest Service will improve how it manages and provides sustainable trails by using this strategy as a catalyst for change over the next decade.

Shifting to a Model of Shared Stewardship

Shifting from a model of the Forest Service attempting to “do it all” to meet the expectations and needs of trail users and stakeholders, to a model where the Forest Service, trail users, and stakeholders form a collective community of stewards who provide support to and receive shared benefits from trails.



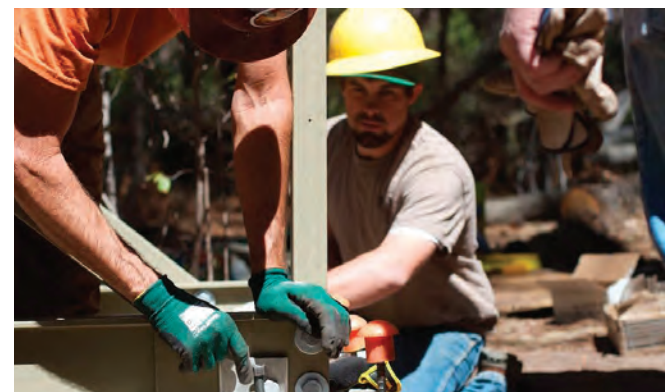
* Including nongovernmental organizations



Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Idaho (Forest Service photo by Joni Packard)



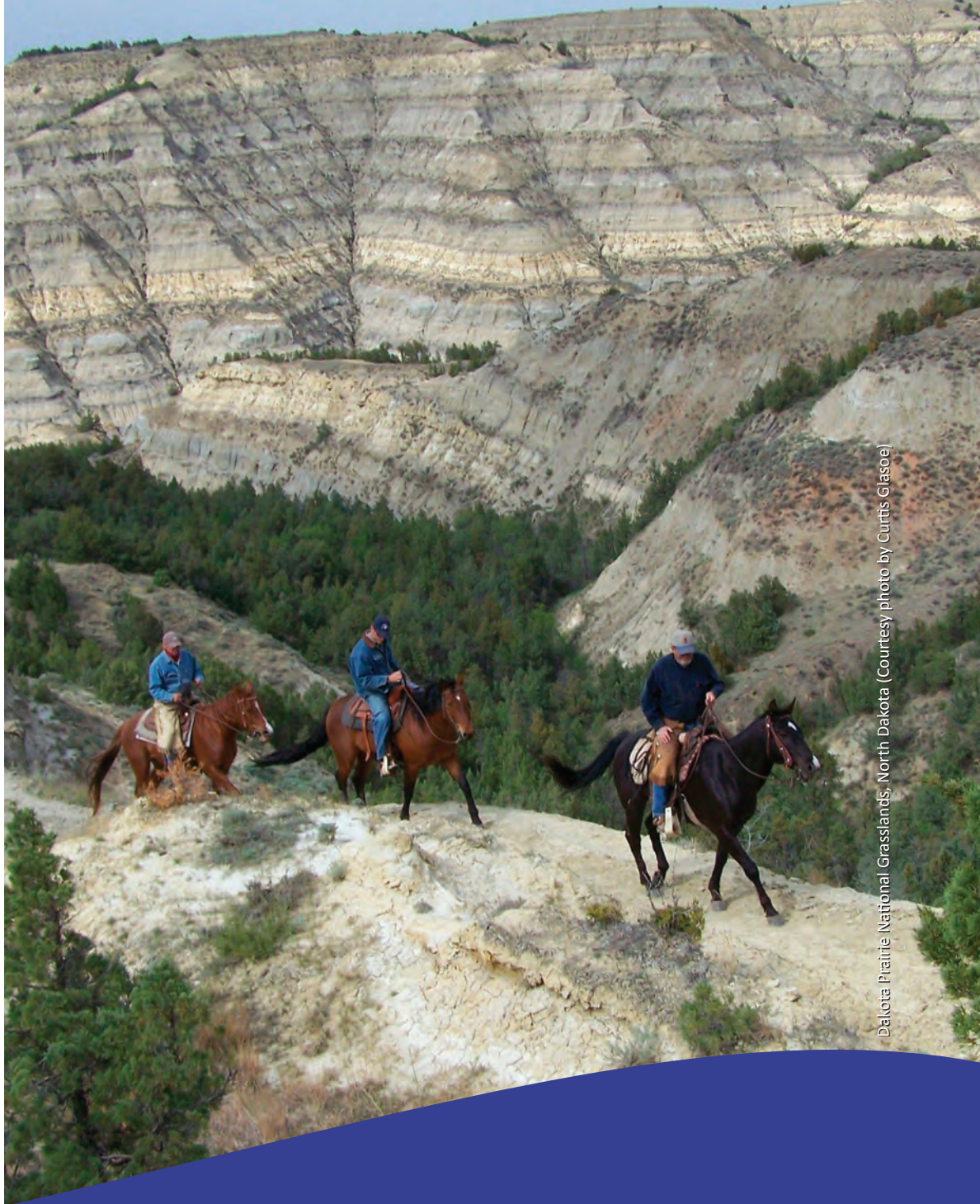
Tonto National Forest, Arizona (Courtesy photo by Alan Levine)



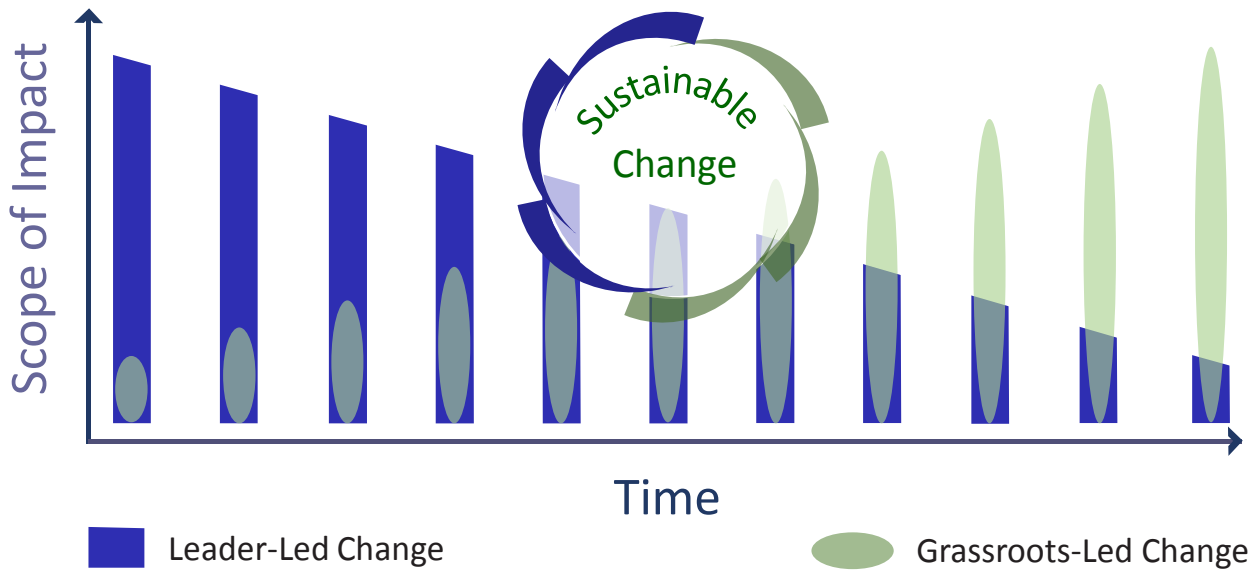
Tonto National Forest, Arizona (Courtesy photo by Alan Levine)

Strategic Intent

The strategic intent of the strategy is to embrace and inspire a different way of thinking—and doing—to create sustainable change where grassroots initiative meets leader intent. The combined effort and momentum of many minds and hands will move the trails community, as a whole, toward shared solutions. This strategy builds on the many examples from across the country where the Forest Service, its partners, and the greater trails community have successfully embraced a community-driven and locally sustainable trail system model. Leaders, employees, partners, volunteers, trail users, and friends can use this document to strengthen stewardship and dedication to improve a world-class, diverse trail system as one of America's greatest legacies.



Dakota Prairie National Grasslands, North Dakota (Courtesy photo by Curtis Glasoe)



Adapted from a diagram developed by Blake Leath (c) Copyright 1992-2016 Leath Group, LLC. Permission granted by leathgroup.com.

Sustainable Change

Leader-led change is often initiated with a high level of impact that may wane over time. Grassroots-led change often grows slowly, yet must be adopted by leadership to achieve lasting results. Sustainable change is cultivated where leader intent meets grassroots initiative and both are infused with regular feedback and support.



Cibola National Forest, New Mexico
(Forest Service photo)



National Forests of Florida, Florida
(Courtesy photo by Sandra Friend)



Bridger-Teton National Forest, Wyoming
(Forest Service photo by Mary Cernicek)

Sustainable Trail System

A sustainable trail system is a holistic network of diverse physical and social resources comprised of actual on-the-ground routes and associated community health and economic benefits.

It is a resilient system consisting of a wide array of well-planned, well-designed, well-constructed, and well-managed trails that are supported by a mosaic of public and private interests. The system inspires stewardship and invites people of all ages and abilities—and from all backgrounds—to enjoy trails and use them to connect to their public lands while protecting and conserving natural and cultural resources.



Land Between the Lakes Recreation Area, Kentucky (Forest Service photo by Regina Roby)



El Yunque National Forest, Puerto Rico (Courtesy photo by Mecklenzie Helmandollar-Powell)

Three Spheres of Sustainability

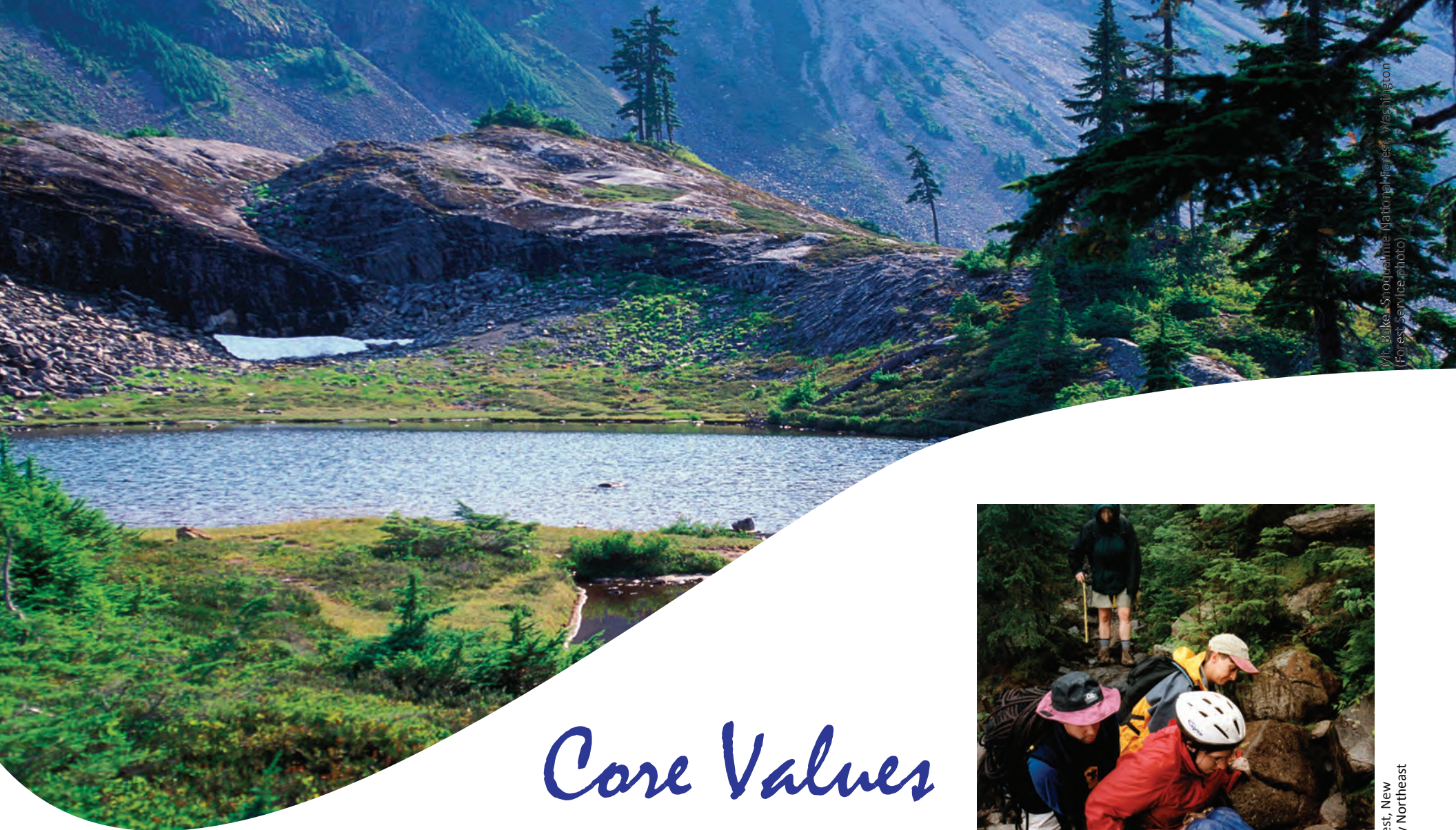
Social, ecologic, and economic considerations are essential elements of a sustainable trail system. Sustainability is achieved at the junction where trails are socially relevant and supported, ecologically resilient, and economically viable.



Mt. Hood National Forest, Oregon (Forest Service photo)

National forests and grasslands have more than 158,000 miles of trails. That is a huge resource... a huge opportunity... and a huge challenge that we cannot meet alone.

– Former Forest Service Chief, Thomas L. Tidwell



Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Washington
(Forest Service photo)

Core Values

At the Forest Service, we are embracing seven core values and invite our partners, volunteers, and friends to join us in adopting these values to guide our collective efforts. By adopting the following core values, we lay the foundation together for making sustainable trail systems a priority and ensuring pathways to public lands remain—for all people, for many generations to come.



White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire (Courtesy photo by Northeast Passage/Belson)

Safety: We value the safety of trail users, volunteers, partners, and employees and are dedicated to performing our work safely and providing safe trail opportunities for all.

Sustainability: We value the land and will steward a trail system that is relevant to a changing society, is ecologically viable, and that can be sustained by current and potential partner, volunteer, and agency resources.

Commitment: We value the strong traditions, skills, and dedication of our partner, volunteer, and employee workforce and will foster continued growth through training and leadership opportunities.

Access: We value the ability of everyone to connect to the outdoors and are committed to providing quality access through a variety of trail settings and opportunities.

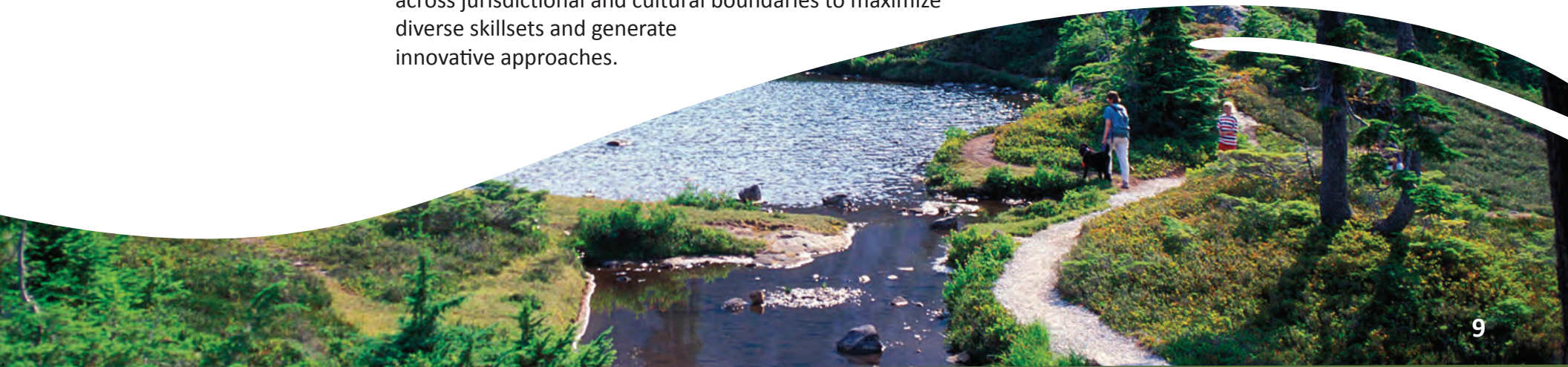
Inclusion: We value everyone—trail users, partners, volunteers, employees, and friends, regardless of age, ability, or cultural background.

Communication: We value the exchange of information that is up-to-date, accurate, widely available in multiple formats, and relevant to both trail users and those involved in sustainable trail planning, design, and maintenance.

Relationships: We value collaborative relationships and are committed to working across jurisdictional and cultural boundaries to maximize diverse skillsets and generate innovative approaches.



Black Hills National Forest, South Dakota (Forest Service photo by Bethany Doten)



Areas of Action

In achieving a sustainable trail system, we face six areas that require action:

- ▶ **Leader Intent**
- ▶ **Organization and Talent**
- ▶ **Relevancy**
- ▶ **Sustainable Systems**
- ▶ **Agency Processes and Culture**
- ▶ **Information**

Each area poses a **challenge** that can be transformed into an **aspiration** that is achieved through a series of focused **actions**. Key to that transformation is the capacity of people, resources, and ideas. By shifting to a model of shared stewardship, with combined energy and resources, we will expand capacity and create the space to achieve these aspirations.

The aspirations and actions can be scaled and adapted to inspire change at all levels of the agency, as well as with partners, volunteers, and friends. We expect that progress toward achieving these aspirations will result in expanded capacity and on-the-ground change. We also recognize that many of the actions are inter-related and cannot be accomplished all at once or in sequence.

We will incorporate the actions into a 10-Year Sustainable Trails Stewardship Challenge and into our annual program of work over the next decade. These actions also align with the recommendations in the 2013 Government Accountability Office trail maintenance report: Forest Service Trails: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability available at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-618>.



Carson National Forest, New Mexico (Courtesy photo by Jesse Tremaine)

Challenges

Leader Intent:

Trails are not an agency priority

Organization and Talent:

Capacity and skillset are limiting

Relevancy: People are disconnected from trails

Sustainable Systems:

Many trails are not sustainable

Agency Processes and Culture:

Barriers exist to partnering and stewardship

Information: Trail Information does not meet agency or public needs

Capacity

Capacity is the bottleneck and the leverage that can be expanded through action

Action is the way forward

Aspirations

Leader Intent:

Trails are an agency priority

Organization and Talent: Combined workforce expands capacity and skill

Relevancy: Trails are valued by diverse users

Sustainable Systems: Trails are well designed, maintained, and used

Agency Processes and Culture:

Improved and innovative approaches are adopted

Information: Trail Information is current, available, and used by many

WHEELER PEAK
12,151 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL
HIGHEST POINT IN NEW MEXICO

Leader Intent

Cultivate leadership desire for and commitment to a sustainable trail system.

Challenge: Sustainable trail systems have not been a priority due to factors such as competing priorities and declining budgets.

Aspiration: Agency and partner leaders see trails as a primary means for connecting people to their public lands; fostering citizen stewards; and generating social, environmental, and economic benefits for individuals and communities.

A sustainable trail system starts with leadership.

—Sam Commarto, District Recreation Officer,
Klamath National Forest



San Juan National Forest, Colorado (Courtesy photo by The Durango Herald/Jerry McBride)



Chugach National Forest, Alaska (Forest Service photo)

Actions

- 1.1 Inspire Intent and Commitment:** Inspire agency leaders, employees, partners, volunteers, trail users, and friends to achieve shared stewardship of a sustainable trail system.
- 1.2 Implement 10-Year Trail Challenge:** Using the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System Act in 2018 as a catalyst, invite partners, volunteers, and employees to develop and implement a bold, national 10-Year Sustainable Trails Stewardship Challenge toward achieving a sustainable system of trails.
- 1.3 Apply Leader Intent Incentives:** Develop incentives for demonstrating and championing leader intent at all levels of the agency, including the application of associated annual performance expectations.
- 1.4 Establish Trails Advisory Group:** Establish a Trails Advisory Group comprised of agency employees to give advice and timely input to the Chief of the Forest Service on emerging trail issues.
- 1.5 Encourage Shared Partner Leadership:** Encourage establishment of a multipartner group—championed by NGOs, academia, Indian tribes, and other agencies and entities—to contribute shared leadership in carrying out this strategy.

Organization and Talent

Leverage an expanded and combined workforce to increase stewardship capacity.

Challenge: The current lack of capacity and adequate skillset at the field level is limiting the Forest Service's ability to effectively manage and maintain a sustainable trail system and to be a good partner.

Aspiration: A combined workforce of skilled professionals, technicians, and conveners—comprised of agency employees, partners, and volunteers—is present, actively engaged, and committed to the stewardship of a sustainable trail system.



Flathead National Forest, Montana
(Forest Service photo by Michael Reavis)



Chugach National Forest, Alaska
(Forest Service photo by Ron Niebrugge)



Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, Arizona. Forest Service photo by Paul Scifvick

Actions

2.1

Sustain and Maximize Talent:

Sustain and maximize talent within the collective trails community by orchestrating recruitment and career development opportunities and pathways for agency and partner trail program managers, technicians, and temporary employees.

2.2

Evaluate and Reorganize Trail Program:

Evaluate and reorganize the trails program at all levels to both increase field capacity and to shift toward collaborative and inclusive trail stewardship.

2.3

Identify Essential Skills:

Identify essential skills and core competencies for technical trail management and partnership facilitation for employees and volunteers.

2.4

Champion Integrated Training:

Champion a collaborative approach to develop and offer training for leaders, practitioners, managers, and volunteers that includes three basic elements: trail program and information management; trail maintenance and field skills, including traditional and emerging skills and techniques; and volunteer/partner management, coordination, and certifications.

Relevancy

Connect with diverse communities and trail users.

Challenge: Due to urbanization, changing demographics, obsession with screen time, as well as a growing demand for new trail opportunities and emerging uses, people are becoming increasingly disconnected from public lands and trails in many places.

Aspiration: Trails are widely valued, enjoyed, used to access public lands, and recognized for their benefits to society. Trail users and partners have a strong unified voice and reflect the demographics of the Nation.



It's all yours.



Tread Lightly!



Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics: www.LNT.org

Engage and motivate future public land stewards through programs like Leave No Trace, Tread Lightly!, and National Forest Foundation's "It's all yours" campaign.

Actions

3.1

Identify and Communicate Benefits:

Collaborate with public, tribal, and private partners—including academia and industry—to further identify and communicate the local and societal economic, health, and wellness benefits of trails and to encourage broader use and collective support.

3.2

Foster Cultural Relevance:

Actively listen to and engage diverse communities, including the next generation of trail users, to foster trail opportunities and networks that are accessible and relevant to their interests.

3.3

Support Outdoor Recreation

Economy: Work with local communities, partners, and industry to understand and leverage how trail systems can support rural and urban economic health and growth where appropriate and through strategically targeted investments.

3.4

Build upon Outreach and User

Ethics Programs:

Build upon successful outreach and user ethics programs, including work done by partners and foundations, to engage and motivate future stewards of public lands.

3.5

Expand Use of Service and Job

Corp Programs:

Expand integration of 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, Job Corps, and similar youth and veteran programs to increase the benefits of trail stewardship.

Sustainable Systems

Collaboratively create and achieve a common vision.

Challenge: Many trails are not socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable, including many legacy trails that were not well designed or located and are not being used for their intended purpose. These unsustainable trails—and the proliferation of unauthorized or user-created trails—drain agency resources.

Aspiration: Trail systems are sustainably designed, well maintained, used for their intended purpose, and valued and supported by trail users and communities.



Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, Arizona
(Courtesy photo by Simon Cox)



Flathead National Forest, Montana (Forest Service photo by Michael Reavis)

Actions

4.1

Create Shared Understanding: Invite national/regional/local trail groups to create a shared understanding of how to better balance the desire for more opportunities for current and emerging trail uses with the need for a sustainable trail system.

4.2

Identify Sustainable Trail Systems: Collaboratively identify socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable trail systems across unit and jurisdictional boundaries, incorporating contemporary design principles and including potential new trails and ways of repurposing, realigning, or decommissioning existing trails.

4.3

Implement 10-Year Stewardship Plans: Develop and carry out regional-, forest-, or district-level 10-year plans to steward the majority of trails with assistance from partners and volunteers.

4.4

Assess Proposed Trails: Evaluate new trail proposals to make sure they are sustainable and supported by adequate stewardship resources.

4.5

Invite Trail Endowment: Advocate with the NGO and partner community to establish a national trail endowment, pursue nontraditional funding sources, and invite contributions to help leverage resources to carry out this strategy.

Agency Processes and Culture

Maximize opportunities for effective partnering and trail stewardship.

Challenge: The Forest Service faces barriers, both perceived and real, to effectively partnering and managing sustainable trail systems.

Aspiration: Agency leaders, employees, and partners collectively understand the intent and latitude of laws, regulations, and policies. They use streamlined processes and innovative methods to collaboratively partner in stewarding a sustainable trail system.



Coronado National Forest, Arizona (Courtesy photo by Nogales International/Murphy Woodhouse)



Tonto National Forest, Arizona (Courtesy photo by Mike Brandt)



Pike and San Isabel National Forests & Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands, Colorado
(Courtesy photo by Rachel Franchina)

Actions

- 5.1 Remove Barriers:** Identify and overcome real and perceived barriers to effective partnering and to using nontraditional funding sources, including providing improved communication, additional guidance for discretion in decision-making, and related training.
- 5.2 Provide Efficiency Tools:** Identify and develop institutional tools that actively support effective partnering—including technical guides, standardized templates, and readily available training materials.
- 5.3 Apply Cross-Program Integration:** Identify opportunities to actively integrate between agency program areas to meet trail restoration and stewardship objectives.
- 5.4 Establish Community of Practice:** Collaboratively share successes, creative solutions, best practices, and tools through a trails community of practice and network of shared knowledge.

Information

Provide readily available, up-to-date, and credible trail information.

Challenge: Trail information is incomplete, not consistently available or easily accessed, and does not fully meet the needs of the public or of Forest Service field personnel and managers.

Aspiration: Trail information is current, available, useful, and used by many people.



Custer Gallatin National Forest, Montana
(Courtesy photo by Edward Klim)



Kaibab National Forest, Arizona
(Forest Service photo by Kevin Larkin)

Actions

- 6.1 Integrate Shared Data Collection and Use:** With partners and trail users, champion an integrated approach to collect and share trail data and information that better serve the public, emphasizing open data, citizen science, and other contemporary approaches.
- 6.2 Improve Data Tools:** Update and streamline agency trail databases, requirements, and management tools to efficiently meet public, partner, and agency trail information needs.
- 6.3 Meet Data Standards:** Meet minimum standards of trail information on all Forest Service units, including accurate and readily available trail spatial data.

A Call to Action



Chugach National Forest, Alaska (Courtesy photo by Abe Schmidt)

The time to build on past successes, integrate new partnerships and ideas, and improve contemporary trail management practices for the Forest Service trail system is now.

By engaging with internal and external collaborators, building on shared values, acknowledging current challenges, and embracing change, we can improve our trail program and achieve a sustainable trail system. Although the challenges are great, the opportunities to restore and transform the largest trail system in the world are even greater. When people are passionate and dedicated, their creativity and ingenuity outweigh the obstacles before them.

We invite you to join us however you can, whether on the trail or in a meeting room, offering your energy or offering resources, building bridges or building relationships. With your help, this incredible legacy of trails will continue to feed our hearts, minds, souls, and communities. We know that we do not have all the answers, but together we have found a launching point.

Let's go!



Lolo National Forest, Montana (Courtesy photo by Damien Hoffman)

Visit the National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System Web site:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/trail-management/strategy/index.shtml>



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