

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 2, 2026

Mr. Tom Schultz
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Schultz:

We write with strong concerns regarding a December 2025 report published by the U.S. Forest Service on the status of the U.S. Forest Service's National Trail Program. The report warns of significant challenges in sustaining trail operations and recreation access, as well as potential loss of decades of investments in trail infrastructure.

The public land recreation economy contributes over \$350 million every day to our national economy, \$128 billion every year, and the National Forest System (NFS) plays a significant role in that contribution. There are over 164,000 miles of trails in the NFS, with 84 million people annually visiting trails and 143,000 jobs supported by recreation and tourism spending. Considering the importance of the National Scenic and Historic Trails statutorily created by Congress for the Forest Service to manage, and the Forest Service National Trail Program in general, the report findings that public access and overall recreation satisfaction "will continue to decline in 2026 and beyond without direction to prioritize investments into these programs," is troubling.

The report draws on input from 290, mostly district-level, Forest Service staff to assess current challenges facing Forest Service trail operations. It found that workforce shortages and loss of trails expertise, low morale, poor communication, operational gaps, and stalled and unfunded contracts and agreements threaten decades of investments into the Forest Service's trail system. The report's conclusions raise serious questions about the public's ability to enjoy National Forest Trails, particularly as the Forest Service adjusts to a workforce that has declined by at least 16 percent in the last year.

A key finding of the report is that workforce vacancies, hiring freezes, and lost skills are weakening the agency's ability to maintain trails and effectively leverage partners' contributions to the upkeep of trails. Beyond staffing challenges, the Forest Service National Trail Program identifies unclear priorities, inconsistent messaging, and misalignment of priorities and resources as ongoing barriers to trail maintenance. The report also highlights deficiencies in grants and agreement (G&A) management as a primary challenge to maintaining Forest Service trails.

Given the importance of this issue, we request responses to each of the following questions no later than February 18, 2026, on the Forest Service's plan to address the immediate needs listed in the report.

1. What is the Forest Service's plan and timeline for addressing all of the issues raised in the report?
2. Is the Forest Service planning to extend externally funded and disaster-funded Permanent Seasonal Employee (PSE) positions?
3. Please describe the steps the Forest Service is planning to take to increase G&A capacity in the trail program.
4. How will Forest Service leadership provide accurate, consistent direction and resources to all levels of the agency to ensure the trails program can implement its mission?
5. Will the Forest Service consider restoring direct hire authority for the Youth Conservation Corps program?
6. How is the Forest Service planning to ensure appropriate staffing levels are restored and maintained?
7. How will the Forest Service invest in training for partners, and volunteers on trail maintenance and operations?
8. The National Trails System Act of 1968 requires the Forest Service to provide for the development and maintenance of the National Scenic and Historic Trails (NSHT) under its jurisdiction. Given the report's findings, what is the Forest Service's plan for ensuring all statutory requirements of the National Trails System Act of 1968 are met for the NSHT under the Forest Service's jurisdiction?

Forest Service staff and partners are critical to maintaining the over 164,000 miles of trails in the National Forest System. The challenges and impacts in the Program report are deeply concerning and raise questions about what steps the Forest Service will take to maintain the public's ability to access and use Forest Service trails. We look forward to your timely response on this important matter.


Sincerely,



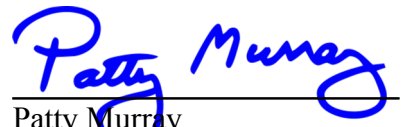
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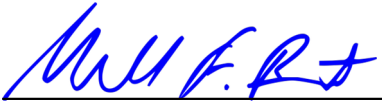
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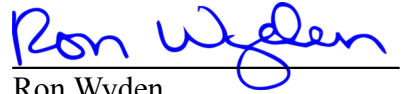
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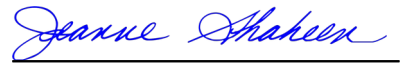
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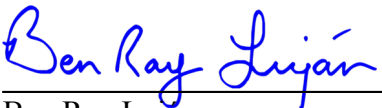
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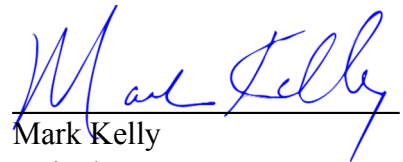
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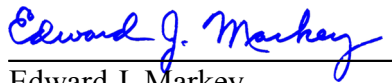
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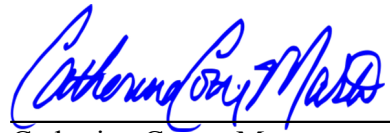


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