

Testimony of Frank R. Beum
Board Member
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Before the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on
Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
March 6, 2025

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Frank Beum, and I serve on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR). NAFSR is a non-partisan, professional, and science-based organization of U.S. Forest Service retirees and associates. We represent over 900 members dedicated to sustaining the heritage of our national forests and grasslands and adapting to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

In this moment, we are gravely concerned with the impacts to essential services caused by recent actions to cut the Forest Service workforce. Steeper cuts to staff and programs are expected, significantly impeding the ability of the Forest Service to deliver critical goods and services to the American people. This includes work outlined in the Fix Our Forests Act.

I retired from the Forest Service in May 2024 on the 43rd anniversary of my first day as a seasonal forestry technician on the Rio Grande National Forest in Colorado. I used a chainsaw to thin lodgepole pine forests during my first two seasons. In all, I worked on 5 ranger districts, 7 national forests, 3 regional offices in Atlanta, Ogden, and Denver, and at the headquarters here in Washington. I worked in the woods marking timber sales and taking care of wilderness and recreation areas before I moved into leadership roles - retiring as the leader of the Rocky Mountain region based in Denver, responsible for 17 national forests and 7 national grasslands in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas.

In January 2024, NAFSR and 36 other organizations representing millions of outdoor enthusiasts sent a letter to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jefferies supporting the Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA). This legislation would provide land managers with tools desperately needed to strengthen the role of states, tribes, local government, collaborative groups and other partners in forest management. The end goal is to leverage expertise, optimize investments, and maximize outcomes. Passage of the Fix Our Forests Act will help Forest Service staff plan and implement more projects that will reduce the threat of this country's wildfire crisis, improve forest resilience, and enhance rural prosperity.

Yet, we are greatly concerned about the ability of the Forest Service to carry out the intent of this legislation, and indeed its overall mission, considering the recent cuts in field-going staff. Additionally, other cuts to staff and programs are expected with the potential large-scale Reductions In Force (RIFs) required by the Executive Order signed on February 11, 2025.

As retired professionals who spent our careers working to conserve the more than 193 million acres of our national forests and grasslands, we members of NAFSR understand the importance of fiscal responsibility and recognize the need for efficiency and cost reductions. We know federal agencies operate within the Executive branch, and the Forest Service has always worked with incoming administrations to implement shifts in priorities.

However, the recent cuts imposed by the Department of Government Efficiency do not resemble an attempt to improve efficiencies, because they do not maintain essential services focused on the needs of the American public. These indiscriminate reductions, alongside nearly 1,000 staff who took deferred resignations and the planned significant Reductions in Force, are hollowing out the agency, jeopardizing the future of America's forests, and, ultimately, the American taxpayers they serve. Furthermore, it appears these drastic reductions were made so far with little or no review of the work these people were hired to do, and no analysis of the efficiency or performance of these individuals.

Ranchers, miners, loggers, campers, hikers, skiers, hunters, anglers, and even people who value clean drinking water will feel the impacts. Our national forests and grasslands are an incredible public land heritage managed for the benefit of present and future generations. Over 180 million people in more than 68,000 communities rely on national forests for their drinking water. Spending by visitors to national forests and grasslands contributes about \$10.3 billion annually to the U.S. economy and sustains more than 140,000 family wage jobs that are the foundation of many rural communities. The Forest Service works closely with State Foresters in the delivery of state programs. The agency also leads the world in forestry research, improving lives in countless ways, making homes safer from hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires.

All of this is at risk due to sweeping, indiscriminate staffing cuts that threaten the future of our public land heritage. I have several examples to share:

- Approximately 3,400 Forest Service employees with less than one year of service in their positions were designated for firing recently simply because they were easy targets.
- Many of these "probationary" employees were hired after a bipartisan call from Congress to build staffing to reduce wildfire risk. Removing them from the ranks of the Forest Service puts the agency back 2 years.
- Many of those fired are military veterans, hired through special authorities as a recognition of their service to our country.
- More than 75 percent of those dismissed employees had wildland firefighting qualifications—skills critical to supporting full-time firefighters.
- In Colorado alone, 67 employees trained in wildland firefighting have been fired or resigned in the last two weeks. Two of these employees were the most senior, experienced agency leaders in Colorado.

- Several individuals hired to work on Hurricane Helene recovery efforts on National Forests in the North Carolina mountains and middle Georgia were fired.
- Six of 7 members of the of the timber strike team in the Rocky Mountain region, responsible for 65% of the region's timber sales, were fired.
- We just received word that leases on many of the offices in your states and local communities are being cancelled, forcing the Forest Service to quickly abandon those locations.

While some of these employees who were hastily fired have been brought back to do important work, please do not underestimate how this uncertainty has damaged morale and slowed work in wildland fire prevention, timber management, and storm recovery. Additional program and personnel cuts are on the horizon, and these will cripple the Forest Service. That will make it difficult for the agency to deliver on the promise of the Fix Our Forests Act.

It means thousands of communities will face greater wildfire risks as planned fuel reduction projects go uncompleted. It means businesses reliant on forest-related goods and services will suffer, and it means the agency will struggle to meet the Administration's goal of wood independence. It also means campgrounds will close, visitor centers will reduce or eliminate services, and trails and roads will be blocked by fallen trees. Communities, especially rural ones, will lose not just economic opportunities but also the dedicated public servants who live and work there.

A point about these public servants: every one of them took an oath – the same oath taken by members of Congress – to protect and defend the Constitution and faithfully discharge their duties. They are real people - family, friends and neighbors - dedicated to caring for the land and delivering services to the American people.

If the Forest Service is hollowed out to the point of no longer being able to provide essential services and programs, there may be calls to move these treasured National Forest System lands to states, counties or private ownership. This would be a tragedy.

President Teddy Roosevelt had it right: public lands belong to all Americans and should be managed under federal protection. Roosevelt acted to save America's diminishing natural resources and brought 230 million acres of public land under increasing protection as national forests, national parks, and wildlife refuges. Public lands held in public trust is a uniquely American ideal. They are the envy of the world and managed using scientific principles that have become the bedrock of public land management policy.

Americans love and treasure their national forests and grasslands. Dedicated public servants protect and conserve these lands for all. Without them, our natural heritage is lost, and the intent of the Fix Our Forests Act cannot be delivered.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.