



# **Bighorn National Forest**

**2023 Annual Report**



# Welcome to the Bighorn National Forest 2022 Annual Report

Learn about our annual accomplishments and opportunities to work with us through volunteerism and partnerships in the next year.

## Bighorn National Forest Facts

- General Forest land area 1,115,161 acres
- Land types: About 60 percent forested, about 40 percent shrub, meadow, or rock
- Average annual budget \$7 million
- Elevations: Lowest—5,500 feet Highest—Cloud Peak at 13,167 feet
- Special areas and designations:
  - Cloud Peak Wilderness—191,914 acres
  - Rock Creek Recommended Wilderness—33,850 acres
  - Over 1,200 miles of trail opportunities including two National Recreation Trails
    - Bucking Mule Falls National Recreation Trail
    - Shell Falls National Recreation Trail
  - Four research natural areas—6,400 acres
  - Three scenic byways: Bighorn Scenic Byway, Cloud Peak Skyway, Medicine Wheel Passage
  - Medicine Wheel/Medicine Mountain National Historic Landmark



## 2023 Goods and Services Accomplishments:

Grants and Agreements with counties\*

Funds for weed abatement, law enforcement, emergency flood assistance, and assistance with law enforcement patrols: Big Horn County \$281,300, Johnson County \$266,160, Sheridan County \$272,360, Washakie \$5,720.

Grants and Agreements with Wyoming State entities\*

Funds for WY State Trails, WY Game and Fish Department, University of WY, and other state entities: \$1,063,801.

Grants and Agreements with other organizations including non-profits\*

Funds for Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Sheridan Community Land Trust, youth conservation corps, and more: \$841,661

(\*These amounts include funds allotted, as well as non-cash expenses such as Forest Service personnel salary and/or equipment).



## 2023 Commercial livestock grazing accomplishments:

78 active allotments on 822,337 acres, 98 term grazing permits, Animal unit months permitted 90,006, Animal unit months authorized 75,736.

(Permitted is the maximum number allowed under a permit in any given year. Authorized is the number applied for in the current year and were subsequently authorized by the District Ranger to graze on the Forest).



### Fire and fuels management:

Staffing includes three engines, Black Tooth Fire Module, Cloud Peak Fuels Crew, and Wyoming Interagency Hotshots.

### Hazardous fuels reduction:

5,400 acres

Wildland fire history (1910 through 2015)

Average fires per year 16 (47 percent lightning, 53 percent human caused) Average acres per year 1,195

Largest wildfire Bone Creek 13,450 acres in 2007



## Educational Outreach:

In the fiscal year 2023, employees made presentations at local parks, on the forest, virtually, and at events. Wildlife biologists, firefighters, timber foresters, Smokey Bear, and specialists in recreation and range management provided information and education to 2,400 children and 864 adults. Presentations ranged from wildfire prevention, careers with the Forest Service, forest management, invasive species, and outdoor ethics.

In addition to outreach, more people were reached through interpretation and education efforts at the Medicine Wheel/Medicine Mountain National Historic Landmark and Shell Falls Visitor Center. The historic landmark received 6,893 visitors this year. The visitor center was not open due to the lack of power to the building, but interpreters met with people outdoors on several weekends. Numbers of visitors to Shell Falls were not collected.

## Community Relationships:

In 2023, volunteers provided over 3,902 hours of labor valued at \$124,083 for a variety of recreation, resources, heritage, and trails projects.

Overall, the Bighorn has 42 partnership agreements with local community groups, state agencies, and national organizations. The estimated dollar value of these partnerships exceeds \$4,000,000.00.





# 2023 Forest Management Accomplishments:

- 13,370 hundred cubic feet (ccf) of timber and forest products were awarded to purchasers, including almost 3,000 ccf sold through over the counter permits (post and pole and firewood).
- 60 acres of harvesting was completed by the Wyoming Forestry Division under Good Neighbor Authority.
- Another 90 acres of harvesting was completed on active Forest Service timber sale contracts.
- 11.3 miles of forest service roads were reconstructed by timber sale contractors.
- Three timber sale areas in the Tie Flume Project totaling 1,043 acres and 25,780 ccf were prepped and inventoried for sale offering in 2024.
- Under Good Neighbor Authority the Wyoming Forestry Division assisted with layout and prep of an additional 400 acres of timber sale areas in the Sheridan Watershed Project.
- About 900 acres of pre-commercial thinning work was completed in immature pine stands of the Tie Flume Project.
- An additional 230 acres of pre-commercial thinning work was completed by the Wyoming Forestry Division on the Powder River Ranger District.
- About 800 acres of additional pre-commercial thinning areas were flagged and prepped for upcoming treatment in 2024.
- Monitoring of natural tree regeneration progress was completed on 766 acres of past timber harvest and 300 acres were certified as restocked.



# Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) Projects on the Bighorn National Forest

Three Great American Outdoors Act projects were completed in the Bighorn National Forest in 2023.



## **Hunter Road, Forest System Road 19- Road Improvements**

The project included clearing and grubbing of the roadway, the placement of aggregate surface course, culvert and sign installations, and road reconditioning of the entire 2.75 miles of road.

- The contract was awarded to Oedekoven Excavation
- The project started in June 2023 and finished in September 2023



## **Crazy Woman Road, Forest System Road 33- Phase 2 Design**

This project was to design a replacement bridge at mile 1.7, repairs on bridge at mile 4.1, culvert repairs at mile 4.52, along with designing retaining walls along the last .5 mile of the road.

- The contract was awarded to RDG, subcontractor Morrison Miaerle
- All design work is expected to be completed by December 2023



# GAOA Project Burgess Road 15, Road Improvements

The project improved the entire 26 miles of Road 15. Work included roadway reconditioning, clearing and grubbing, placing gravel, site distance improvements, sign installation, dust abatement, and more.

- The contract was awarded to WYODAK, subcontractor Mullinax
- Work began in 2022 and was completed in August 2023



## Legacy Roads and Trails Project, Canyon Creek Road and Channel Improvements

This phase of the project included survey and design. The Forest partnered with Trout Unlimited who solicited for design bids from contractors, reviewed bides, and contractor selection. Input was provided through this process by the Forest Service. The project is expected to be implemented in 2024. During this time, Bighorn National Forest personnel will provide on-site inspections and work monitoring.



# Prince Timber Sale Road Work



In preparation of the Prince Timber Sale on the Tongue Ranger District, approximately 11 miles of road improvements were accomplished. Improvements to Forest System Roads 223, 223411, 223412, 223413 and 224211 included clearing and grubbing, road reconditioning, spot aggregate placement, drainage work, culvert installation, and sign installation. Work began in June 2023 and was completed in August 2023.



# Aquatic and Riparian Restoration

The Bighorn NF and multiple partners have worked together for years to maintain and restore aquatic and riparian habitats. Work has ranged from \$500,000 contracts for stream rerouting, restoration, and bank stabilization to large group willow planting projects.

## Accomplishments

In 2023, the Bighorn National Forest, in cooperation with Wyoming Game & Fish Department and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, hosted a crew from the Wyoming Conservation Corps to complete an Aquatic Restoration project on Big Willow Creek. The project consisted of constructing 50 Beaver Dam Analogs and conifer removal along Big Willow Creek to help reestablish floodplain connectivity and expand the surface area of riparian habitat.

## Upcoming Needs

Projects in 2024 and beyond are currently being developed for riparian and aspen enhancement treatment areas and construction of Beaver Dam Analogs in Sheridan Municipal Watershed and Tie Flume Project area. Project needs could include volunteer hours, project partners, and funding.

## Project Contact

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# Bighorn Fence Initiative

The Bighorn National Forest has worked with partners have for years to maintain fences on the Forest in a wildlife friendly manner. This has included construction, reconstruction, and the removal of fences to provide more natural wildlife movement.

## Accomplishments

On August 4-5, 2023, a strong team of two dozen volunteers, with help from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, pulled rotten fence posts and removed woven and barbed wire along Hunter Creek. A ¼-mile of new, wildlife-friendly fence was built to replace the old. Two additional fence removal and modification projects were completed off forest. More work is planned in 2024.

## Upcoming Needs

- Workday with volunteers for fence removal or modification
- Adopt a riparian area exclosure fence or aspen exclosure

## Project Contact

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# Invasive Species

Invasive species are an ecological threat to the Bighorn NF. They diminish watershed protection values, reduce habitat and food sources provided by native species, and can increase wildfire risk.

## Accomplishments

The Johnson County Weed Bounty program was offered for the 5th consecutive year in 2023. The total volume of weeds pulled in the County including Forest lands was 8,444, up 1,683 pounds from last year. Setting another record, there were nearly 200 volunteers in 2023 with 18 groups of volunteers that included over 10 people per group.

## Upcoming Needs

- Encourage citizen science reporting of weed locations through new apps
- Weed pull volunteers

## Project Contact

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# Dispersed Camping Management

For decades, dispersed camping has been noted as an issue in the Bighorn National Forest. To protect natural resources and recreational opportunities for all, camping regulations were changed in 2023. Changes included the 14-day stay limit is now year-round and there is a wildlife attractant storage regulation.

## Accomplishments

Based on the Dispersed Camping Task Force's recommendations along with comments received from six public meetings, online, social media, and visitors, forest managers developed updated camping regulations. Six new permanent staff responsible for enforcing forest regulations were hired (two on each ranger district). Many of these new hires had been temporary employees in the past and are very familiar with the forest. The patrollers field tested a new application. This app allows patrollers to track campers and share information across the forest with other patrollers, making enforcement easier and more efficient.

## Upcoming Needs

- Volunteers for camper patrols and counts
- Volunteers to do restoration work in sensitive and/or highly impacted areas

## Project Contact

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# North Tongue Fishing Access



The North Tongue River continues to grow as a popular angling destination. As the numbers of anglers and other recreational users continue to climb, there is a need to reduce human waste along the North Tongue River.

## Accomplishments

Coordination with the Powder River Basin Chapter of Trout Unlimited resulted in primary scoping and planning for possible improvement objectives to fishing access points along the 3.5-mile stretch of the North Tongue River.

## Upcoming Needs

Future needs will be determined at the annual coordination meeting with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

## Project Contact

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# Trail Work

## 2023 Accomplishments

- Volunteers contributed 960 hours that directly benefitted Bighorn NF trail users. In addition to our volunteers, we were able to partner with Montana Conservation Corp and Wyoming State Trails for an additional approximate 2,000 hours of trail work.
- Montana Conservation Corp (MCC) completed two 8-day hitches in the Rock Creek area. They performed routine trail maintenance and the heavy logout of over 300 trees through the Gilead Burn scar on Balm of Gilead Trail 039. The MCC completed an additional 2 8-day backcountry hitches on the Solitude Loop Trail 038, performing routine trail maintenance in the Cloud Peak Wilderness.
- Wyoming State Trails used their equipment and expertise to improve the Parallel Trail 117 along Highway 16 and Woodrock ATV Trail 216 in the Woodrock area.
- Black Mountain Nordic contributed approximately 384 volunteer hours tirelessly grooming the Nordic Ski Trail systems at Cutler and Sibley Lake. They also annually contribute financial support by providing grooming equipment and many trips up and down the mountain to assure trails are in great shape for anyone who wants to use them.
- A group of young adults from Iowa spent time on the forest performing trail work around Tie Hack Reservoir. In total, they contributed over 400 hours while working toward Leave No Trace training certifications.
- Veterans with the Heroes and Horses program, hosted by Sunlight Ranch, performed 80+ hours of trail work on the Little Horn Trail 050. They repaired a troublesome set of switchbacks in addition to blocking shortcuts created by livestock.

### Project Contact

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## Upcoming Needs

- Volunteers needed for National Public Lands Day (09/28/2024) and National Trails Day (06/01/2024).
- Volunteers to report trail conditions, issues or concerns, as well as great experiences!
- If you or your group would like to see trail improvements, please reach out to coordinate efforts. The program is always interested to hear your ideas and perspective.



# Wilderness Monitoring

Cloud Peak Wilderness is 191,914 acres and preserves many sharp summits and towering sheer rock faces standing above glacier-carved, U-shaped valleys. The area is visited each year by thousands of backpackers who hike along more than 100 miles of trails. In order to understand visitor use levels and how they are impacting wilderness character of the area, the Bighorn NF and our partners are conducting surveys including campsite assessments, user created trail inventories, and invasive species surveys.

## Accomplishments

- Rapid Campsite Assessment – Wyoming Wilderness Association continued to support the campsite assessment surveys. 2023 concluded a multi-year effort to complete a comprehensive survey of all existing and potential campsites in Cloud Peak Wilderness. This survey will serve as a baseline to assess trends into the future
- Wilderness Education – Wyoming Wilderness Association assisted the Bighorn National Forest in implementing the Cloud Peak Wilderness Education plan. Together, we provided over 100 hours of education to both youth and adults (including 5 different schools) reaching over 200 participants in educational outings and outreach.

## Upcoming Needs

- Volunteers for Rapid Campsite Assessment
- Volunteers for User Created Trail Inventories
- Volunteers to assist with wilderness education
- Volunteers for invasive species surveys

## Project Contact

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# Biodiversity Monitoring

Bighorn NF biologists are looking to fill information gaps about species in various habitat types (e.g. aspen, willow, sagebrush, old forest, cliffs). We encourage all Forest visitors to document wildlife and plant sightings on the Forest through the iNaturalist or eBird apps.

## Accomplishments

- iNaturalist records on the Bighorn are at 7,660 observations with 1,030 species recorded a gain of 151 species since last year!
- In eBird, our data are averaging 15-50 bird species observed in each hotspot with a few having nearly 100 or more.

## Upcoming Needs

- Continue development of monitoring projects with partners.
- Continue encouraging visitors and local communities to participate by uploading photos into iNaturalist or eBird.

## Project Contact

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# Monarch Butterfly Monitoring

The Monarch is currently a Candidate Species under the Endangered Species Act. Monarch caterpillars rely on milkweed as their food source until they pupate and transform into butterflies. There are 12 species of milkweed in Wyoming, two of which likely occur on the Bighorn NF (showy milkweed and green comet milkweed). We would like to encourage butterfly enthusiasts to help us find and document monarchs and milkweed on the Forest by submitting monarch, caterpillar and milkweed locations and pictures to community science apps such as the Monarch and Milkweed Mapper, iNaturalist or Butterflies and Moths of North America (BAMONA).

## Accomplishments:

- One monarch sighting on the Forest was uploaded to BAMONA in Oct 2022.
- Several showy milkweed photos in iNaturalist on the Forest which give us an idea of where to look for monarch breeding activity.

## Upcoming Needs

- Develop promotional information
- Connect with partners and community members that want to learn more about how to contribute observations.

## Project Contact

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