



Fire Funding Impacts

Bridger-Teton National Forest

Wyoming

FOREST OVERVIEW

Located in Western Wyoming, the Bridger-Teton National Forest offers more than 3.4 million acres of public land for outdoor recreation enjoyment. With its pristine watersheds, abundant wildlife and immense wildlands, the Bridger-Teton National Forest comprises a large part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem—the largest intact ecosystem in the lower 48 United States. Offering nearly 1.2 million acres of designated wilderness, over 3,000 miles of roads and trails, and thousands of miles of unspoiled rivers and streams, the Bridger-Teton offers something for everyone.

Redirected funds will restrict the ability to accomplish mission critical programs, such as the following.

DECLINING INFRASTRUCTURE

The ability to maintain and successfully operate facilities such as campgrounds, trailheads and buildings is significantly affected by reduced funding; especially when an unforeseen emergency renders some important facilities inoperable. Such an event might be a wash-out in a road, forcing the closure of the road because there are no funds to fix it.

The reduction in facility maintenance funds is insufficient to keep pace with office buildings in major towns, let alone remote guard stations like Bryan Flats. Bryan Flats is a district work center that has fallen into disrepair due to increased costs of fire suppression. This facility, which is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, was constructed in the early 1900s and has been used continuously by forest management personnel and volunteers since that time. The work center is currently unsuitable for habitation as the tent platforms have rotted, toilets and showers are nonfunctional, and the water has tested as unsafe for human consumption. With this facility back in working order, the Forest Service could house and employ high school and college youth and connect people to the land through volunteer work in natural resource management, which is almost impossible given the lack of Forest Service housing in the area and the high cost of rentals in that community.



The ability to properly maintain and operate facilities such as campgrounds is significantly affected by reduced program budgets.

Another case of infrastructure that continues to degrade due to lack of funding is the number of bridges that are deteriorating to a point of eminent failure and are desperately in need of replacement. One example is the 60-year-old Crystal Creek bridge that provides access to a large portion of the forest including numerous operating ranches, commercial outfitter and guide operations, vast recreational opportunities, historic and natural treasures; and indirectly supports the greater recreation-based commercial industry focused on the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. This bridge has exceeded its design life and could fail during the next large runoff event or when the next overweight vehicle attempts to cross the structure posing a serious safety risk to employees, special use permittees, and the public.

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With declining program budgets, there is no money for supplies or awards for seasonal employees, nor the ability to extend seasonal appointments to help perform mission-critical work. It also negatively impacts the ability for the forest to react to non-fire related emergencies (e.g., the failure of an aging bridge).

The forest struggles to cover fixed costs when budgets continue to be reduced. The only alternative to this scenario is to force the reduction of fixed costs through employee attrition or a reduction in force, and elimination of equipment, materials, and supplies required to do work. With reduced capacity, the rate of decay of Forest Service infrastructure accelerates, public sentiment turns more and more against the agency and a negative cycle of failure to meet existing and new demands becomes established.

For example, a public meeting was held to discuss projects to decommission roads that can't be maintained. The magnitude of outrage expressed by stakeholders at the meeting was wide-ranging and filled with expressions of distrust and conspiracy theory about the true motivations of the Forest Service. Local user groups and other stakeholders don't see the connection between declining budgets and the increasing demand to divert funds for fire suppression/fuels management funds and the ability of the Forest Service to deliver its program of work on the ground.

INVASIVE SPECIES

Agreements are established with counties to treat invasive weeds across the forest. On the Bridger-Teton National Forest, diversion of program money for fire suppression resulted in insufficient funds to fully address high priority noxious weed treatments under agreements with Lincoln and Sublette counties.

FLEET AND EQUIPMENT

In addition, \$10,000 that was intended for the purchase of a snowmobile was instead redirected to support fire suppression efforts. Without the purchase of this snowmobile, the quantity and effectiveness of both recreation patrols and endangered species surveys will be reduced. This snowmobile is needed to manage winter recreation use and provide transportation for wildlife specialists who are performing wintertime inventories of threatened and endangered species, namely the lynx and wolverine. Winter recreation patrollers also protect threatened and endangered species by curbing unauthorized off-trail use that negatively affects wildlife habitat.



Reduced program funding impacts established agreements with counties to treat invasive weeds across the forest.