

**TESTIMONY OF CHRIS FRENCH, DEPUTY CHIEF,
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT
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CONCERNING “TRANSPORTATION NEEDS OF TRIBES, FEDERAL LAND
MANAGEMENT AGENCIES, AND U.S. TERRITORIES”**

Chair Norton, Ranking Member Davis and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as the committee considers reauthorization of federal transportation programs. My testimony today will focus on the importance of the Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP) to the critical transportation system maintained by the Forest Service.

NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM ROAD NETWORK

The USDA Forest Service manages over 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands across 44 states and territories. These public lands amount to approximately 30 percent of all federally managed lands and comprise approximately 8 percent of the land area in the United States. On the National Forest System (NFS), infrastructure is the physical link between Americans and their public lands. It strengthens communities by giving them safe access to the many ecological, economic, and social amenities these lands provide. For instance, people use infrastructure on the National Forest System for ranching, farming, logging, outdoor recreation, tourism, energy production and municipal water services, all of which support thriving small businesses, particularly in local communities. People depend on the Forest Service road network to get to schools, stores, hospitals, and homes. Perhaps most critically, forest infrastructure provides fire protection for communities. Firefighters and emergency responders use forest infrastructure to access forest lands for firefighting operations to protect communities, evacuate families from areas at risk, and rescue individuals from danger.

The infrastructure on the National Forest System includes over 370,000 miles of roads. Of these, nearly 65,000 miles are operated for passenger vehicles, 203,000 miles are operated for high-clearance vehicles and over 102,000 are closed to present day traffic, but we anticipate will be needed to meet future management activities. The vast transportation system also includes approximately 6,200 road bridges. Mission essential work that relies on the transportation network like forest management and timber harvesting, mining, and livestock grazing sustains over 118,000 jobs and contributes another \$13 billion to rural economies.

In addition to assisting the agency in both administration and wildland fire management, this transportation system annually supports more than 300 million hunters, anglers, recreationists and other travelers over Forest Service roads. In addition, each year over 150 million visitors use the Forest Service transportation system to access the NFS. These visitors contribute almost \$11 billion to the U.S. economy and sustain more the 148,000 full and part time jobs.

We estimate the cost for preventive maintenance, rehabilitation, and capital improvements; replacing structurally deficient bridges; upgrading many of the 22,000 culverts; and trail maintenance and capital improvements would require a funding level of \$445 million per year for 10 years.

FEDERAL HIGHWAY FUNDING AND THE NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM

The Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act authorizes transportation improvement funding through September 2020. The FAST Act maintained a primary funding program, the Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP), that supports construction activities on infrastructure that accesses high-use recreation sites and economic generators located on Federal lands. Under 23 USC §203(a), FLTP funding shall be used for:

- program administration, transportation planning, research, preventive maintenance, engineering, rehabilitation, restoration, construction, and reconstruction of Federal lands transportation facilities,
- capital, operations, and maintenance of transit facilities;
- any transportation project eligible for assistance under this title that is on a public road within or adjacent to, or that provides access to, Federal lands open to the public; and
- environmental mitigation activities (up to \$10,000,000).

The FAST Act allocates \$355 million average annually to the FLTP for a total 5-year funding amount of \$1.775 billion across the identified Federal Land Management Agencies (FLMA). Authorized funding for transportation infrastructure facilities owned by each FLMA is included in the table below. The FAST Act authorized a total of \$85 million in FLTP program funding for the Forest Service for fiscal years 2016 – 2020.

	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	Total
National Park Service	\$268M	\$276M	\$284M	\$292M	\$300M	\$1.42B
Fish and Wildlife Service	\$30M	\$30M	\$30M	\$30M	\$30M	\$150M
USDA Forest Service	\$15M	\$16M	\$17M	\$18M	\$19M	\$85M
Bureau of Land Management, US Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and Independent Federal Agencies	\$22M	\$23M	\$24M	\$25M	\$26M	\$120M
Total	\$335M	\$345M	\$355M	\$365M	\$375M	\$1.775B

Primary funding for Forest Service transportation infrastructure comes from both Forest Service appropriations and from FLTP. Adjusted for inflation, appropriated resources have been decreasing over the past two decades, notwithstanding a spike in funding for roads in 2010 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The Forest Service receives this FAST Act funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to enhance access to national forest lands and repair roads after natural disasters. This funding represents approximately seven percent of the total funds received for road maintenance and construction annually through

Interior Appropriations and FLTP. The Forest Service and FHWA work together to enhance road safety management, develop long range transportation planning, and collect road condition surveys across the FLTP network. The agency is developing a National Long-Range Transportation Plan with a focus on transportation funding and decision-making and will be the first time the agency has provided national guidance to promote consistency and transparency in managing the roads program. These planning and data collection efforts help the Forest Service focus on performance management when deciding most efficiently what assets to fund construction on and when.

With projects funded by FLTP funding, the Forest Service has completed or is programmed through FY20 to complete 150 projects by spending \$70 million in FLTP construction funding, rehabilitating 546 miles of roads, improving access to over 1,300 National Recreation Areas, replacing 29 bridges in poor condition, reconnecting 204 miles of aquatic habitat by upgrading road-stream crossings, and improving 196 miles of trails. These investments focus on key transportation assets that meet recreation, economic benefit, and environmental goals.

Roads directly under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service also benefit from the Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFO) program. After a natural disaster, ERFO funds are used to restore critical transportation assets to their pre-existing state. This program is critical restoring and maintaining access on National Forest Lands.

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE ON THE NFS ROAD SYSTEM

The state of the Forest Service's transportation infrastructure has fallen far behind what is necessary to meet the needs of our forests and forest users. Approximately \$3.6 billion (of a total of \$5.2 billion) in infrastructure repairs and maintenance have been postponed year-after-year, otherwise known as, "deferred maintenance." Forest roads and bridges are critical for sustaining landscapes across the 193 million acres of National Forest System lands for the benefit of visitors and communities and are also essential in wildland fire management.

The agency is taking several actions to help reduce deferred road maintenance. For example, the Forest Service approach to travel management helps forests plan a road system that best meets community needs and transfers ownership to local communities, counties, or States where appropriate

We are also taking bold steps to streamline our environmental review processes and speed up important work that could help protect communities, livelihoods and resources. The proposed updates would not only give the Forest Service the tools and flexibility to manage the land and tackle critical challenges like wildfire, insects, and disease but also improve service to the American people. The revised rules will also make it easier to maintain and repair the infrastructure people need to use and enjoy their public lands including our road network.

The updates will help reduce our maintenance backlog by implementing a new suite of "categorical exclusions," a classification under NEPA excluding certain routine activities from more extensive, time-consuming environmental impact analysis. The proposed categorical exclusions would include roads and trails management. The new categorical exclusions are based

on intensive analysis of hundreds of environmental assessments and related data and when fully implemented will reduce process delays for routine activities by months or years. We are also streamlining our business practices and implementing new programmatic agreements for consultation with other agencies.

In addition, the agency is specifically streamlining business practices to reduce the deferred maintenance backlog by strategically prioritizing capital improvement projects. For road projects, the agency uses the following criteria in order: (a) projects vital for near-term forest-based economic activity (that is, restoration within the next 5 years); (b) projects needed for safety; (c) projects that improve access to recreation sites and trails; and (d) projects that improve wildlife connectivity, aquatic organism passage, and flood resiliency. The goals are better community service and better access to public lands for emergency response, outdoor recreation, and active resource management. Projects are also evaluated on how they use partnerships to achieve mutual conservation goals through combined efforts.

CONCLUSION

With a backlog of deferred maintenance for forest roads and bridges at \$3.6 billion, the Forest Service cannot achieve a state of good repair on much of its infrastructure on the National Forest System. Deteriorating road infrastructure hampers proper management of the National Forest System and can undermine our firefighting and rescue capabilities, complicate travel to schools and hospitals and hinder commerce with local businesses.

The FLTP has been a critically important program that helps maintain the agency's transportation system and the critical economic and natural benefits it enables. We look forward to working with the committee as it considers reauthorization of the program as well as any infrastructure legislation.