

USDA Forest Service

The Forest Service Volunteer Program



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Chapter 4 DRAFT

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4. The Forest Service Volunteer Program

What role do volunteers play in caring for the national forests and grasslands and other mission areas, and how does one get involved?

The American people maintain more than a third of the United States as public lands.

Caring for these special places—forests, grasslands, wilderness, recreation areas, and cultural and historic resources—requires the help of many dedicated citizens and international visitors.

Volunteers help the Forest Service in countless ways, including keeping wildlife habitat healthy, maintaining recreational amenities, protecting cultural resources, and sustaining healthy watersheds that flow downstream to millions of homes.

4.1 Volunteers Defined

Volunteers are partners who provide new ideas and energy for charitable purposes while promoting stewardship within their communities. Every year, Forest Service volunteers contribute nearly 2,000 person-years of service valued at close to \$100 million. The nation's forests and grasslands—and the communities they support—would not be the same without volunteers!

The Forest Service seeks to inspire and engage volunteers to conserve the nation's natural and cultural resources and ensure sustainability of the public lands legacy. Providing high-quality volunteer experiences is critical to the Forest Service mission.

The Volunteers in the National Forests Act of 1972 gives the Forest Service the authority to accept voluntary services and provides guidance for the volunteer program. In addition, the volunteer program is covered by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and must be inclusive and accessible to all. While volunteers are diverse and any individual or group can apply to be a volunteer, formal policy defines the following four volunteer types:

A **volunteer** is “a person who donates time and talent to advance the mission of the Forest Service and who receives no salary or wages from the Forest Service for the voluntary service.” For example, retirees may serve in a long-term capacity as campground hosts or in visitor centers. Youth may volunteer for a one-day tree-planting event or trash cleanup. Or student interns may volunteer their time toward an archaeological project over the summer for college credit.

A **group volunteer** is “a participant in the volunteer program whose engagement is facilitated by another institution or organization or by a unit of State or local government in cooperation with the Forest Service.” They can either be part of an organized group, such as a nonprofit agency, or participate in a volunteer event open to the public. See section 4.6 for more information.

A **volunteer group** is “an organization whose members donate time and talent to advance the mission of the Forest Service and which receives no salary or wages for its members from the Forest Service for the voluntary service. A volunteer group may also serve in the role as a project manager on behalf of the agency, coordinating and supervising its members, unaffiliated individual volunteers, or other volunteer organizations and its members who want to donate time and talent

to advance the mission of the Forest Service in collaboration with the Forest Service.” See section 4.6 for more information.

An **international volunteer** is “a person who is not a United States citizen or permanent resident and is approved by WO International Programs to volunteer in the U.S. In this arrangement, Forest Service units benefit from cultural exchange and the varied skills and experiences offered by international volunteers. International volunteers gain valuable experience, cross-cultural enrichment, and an understanding of Forest Service practices.”



← 4.2 Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering can be a fun, rewarding experience. Volunteers may form tight social networks, create lasting positive memories, and enrich their lives by donating time and energy to conserve

public lands. Forest Service volunteer programs offer unique avenues for hands-on learning. People from all walks of life gain horizon-expanding experiences as Forest Service volunteers. Volunteers are crucial to sustaining the nation's environmental future. Volunteers are also the eyes and ears of the national forests and grasslands and can alert staff to current on-the-ground conditions, needed projects, and usage/public interest trends.

Baba Dioum, a Senegalese conservationist and poet, said, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."

4.3 Locating and Applying for Volunteer Opportunities

There are numerous ways interested individuals and groups can discover volunteer opportunities with the Forest Service. To get a better idea of Forest Service program areas or explore how their volunteer interests might overlap with an ongoing project, one can visit the [Forest Service Volunteer Homepage](#) or can contact a [volunteer coordinator located in his or her region](#). Each national forest, grassland, and research station will have a volunteer coordinator or other staff member who can help match interested community members with the best volunteer opportunities. [Volunteer.gov](#) also lists opportunities by interest area, such as Archeology, Backcountry/Wilderness, Botany, Historic Preservation, Minerals/Geology, Natural Resource Planning, Range Livestock, Research, and Soil/Watershed. Web site visitors should select **Forest Service** under the **Agency** tab and then select their interest area to view opportunities. Volunteers specifically interested in archeology or heritage and cultural resource projects can learn about the opportunities offered by the [Passport in Time \(PIT\) program](#).

Because some national forest and grasslands are close to cities, urban communities and their citizens may be nearer to public lands than they realize. The Forest Service also partners with organizations in metropolitan areas doing educational research, urban tree plantings, and other projects. People may be able to volunteer without ever having to leave town.

4.4 Volunteer Agreements

The Forest Service must complete [a Volunteer Agreement \(form OF301a\)](#) with the volunteer or volunteer organization before any volunteer assignment begins. The agreement helps the Forest Service establish safety protocols and report accomplishments. Volunteer Agreements should be reviewed annually and must contain a detailed description of the volunteer assignment to be performed for the unit. Instructions for completing the OF-301a form are available on the Intranet website above or from a unit's volunteer coordinator, and the Washington Office Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources can provide additional guidance. Note that individuals under the age of 18 may participate individually or serve with their family or a group or club, but must have the written approval of their parent or legal guardian. Forest Service staff must also work with volunteers to complete the Job Hazard Analysis (JHA), which identifies safety requirements and procedures related to the service activity. This will be an addendum to the Volunteer Agreement.

In addition to the completed Volunteer Agreement and JHA, the following forms may also be required:

- Volunteer Timesheet (FS-1800-25)
- Person Model Data Entry Information, which provides access to Forest Service computers and facilities
- SF-85 Questionnaire for Non-sensitive Positions

- ID Badge Request Form (AD 1197)



4.5 Volunteer Reimbursements

Although volunteers are not considered federal employees (except for purposes of workers compensation and tort liability) and receive no salary or wages from the Forest Service, the agency can reimburse individuals for certain incidental expenses, depending on circumstances, local needs, and budget. Those expenses include meals, mileage, travel, and uniforms. A Forest Service-authorized staff member must submit the [proper forms](#) to the Albuquerque Service Center (ASC) for consideration. Forest Service employees should see FSM 1833.5 and/or contact [ASC MiscPay or Travel](#) for more information.



← 4.6 Partnerships with Volunteer Organizations

Volunteers can be part of much larger, long-term Forest Service projects through Volunteer Groups. These groups help the Forest Service accomplish much more than either entity could alone, and they are a critical component of many mutually beneficial partnerships. Volunteer Groups may be affiliated with almost any type of organization or club, from nonprofits to businesses and from community groups to county, city, or state governments. Youth, civic groups, and religious

institutions often organize volunteer events for their members. Some businesses take a civic-minded approach to their local public lands by partnering with the Forest Service on projects and events and seeking ways to involve their employees in local volunteerism. They may even use those activities as team-building opportunities. Sometimes groups use the value of volunteer hours as in-kind matching support for grants or agreements.

All organized groups are required to designate a liaison to work with the Forest Service unit in framing the partnership, projects and safety training/messaging. Forest Service staff work collaboratively through the liaison to provide appropriate program information to the group, such as reporting requirements and the process for requesting reimbursements (if any) to the group or partner.

The National Forest Foundation (NFF), founded by Congressional charter in 1991, is active in community- and business-based programs that promote the health and public enjoyment of Forest Service lands, sometimes under Friends of the Forest programs. More information is also available on the [Web site](#).



4.7 Volunteer Service Examples

The Forest Service offers a full range of opportunities designed to match its volunteers' interests and abilities. In fact, the only duty volunteers cannot carry out is law enforcement. Retirees or those with summers off may be interested in volunteer service that involves living on a national forest. Others may be interested in a weekend of physically demanding tasks, such as helping rehabilitate hiking trails. Or one may be interested in a less-impactful volunteer opportunity altogether, such as responding to mail or answering the phone. Sample classifications below represent the range of service that volunteers can provide:

Adopt-a-Trail Volunteers are individuals or groups who volunteer their time to maintain Forest Service trails. These volunteers adopt an entire trail or just a section. The service is performed on an ongoing basis, and volunteers are expected to ensure the trail remains in good condition.

Projects generally involve removing rock and debris from the trail, cutting out logs, trimming brush, and removing litter.

Campground Site Hosts are volunteers who agree to spend all or part of a season in a national forest campground or recreation site. These hosts have the responsibility of greeting visitors, explaining site rules, promoting responsible camping or recreational behavior, and gaining visitors' cooperation in keeping areas clean and free of damage. Good hosts are friendly, enjoy the outdoors, and are eager to learn and share their knowledge about forest/grassland areas.

Community Stewardship Coordinator Volunteers are experienced individuals capable of supervising large groups of volunteers, which is especially useful with one-day events, and may help a unit by managing its volunteer program.

Field Project Volunteers serve on a wide range of field projects such as trail maintenance, tree planting, trash removal, and provision of fire/safety information.

Interpretive Volunteers serve in visitor centers, present educational programs to the public, answer questions, hand out Forest Service literature, and generally interact with those looking for guidance on activities.

One-Day Event Volunteers help with annual occasions like [National Public Lands Day](#), [National Get Outdoors Day](#), Earth Day, [World Water Day](#), or [National Trails Day](#). These annual events often involve partners and large groups of volunteers mobilized at many locations across the country, but people may also participate through their local national forest or grassland.

[Passport in Time Volunteers](#) participate in archaeology and historic preservation programs. They serve with professional archaeologists and historians on projects including archaeological excavation, rock art restoration, survey, archival research, historic structure restoration, gathering oral histories, or writing interpretive brochures. Current project information can be found at <http://www.passportintime.com/currentprojects/projects-current.html>.

Resource Volunteers might serve with specialists in wildlife, botany, and fisheries/watershed research.

Wilderness Volunteers go into the backcountry to monitor recreational use, perform stewardship activities, and maintain crucial routes and permitted structures.

← 4.8 Volunteer Orientation, Safety, and Training

Volunteer and employee safety is the highest priority for the Forest Service—volunteer safety policies mirror employee safety policies. Volunteer supervisors, volunteer coordinators, and the unit safety officers provide guidance on safe work practices for volunteers. The Health and Safety Code Handbook can be consulted for detailed safety information. And the JHA attached to the Volunteer Agreement describe the safety, training, and equipment requirements for tasks.



Orientation training is essential for everyone, even those who come to the Forest Service with all the skills needed to perform a service. This training begins by talking about the service that needs to be done and the necessary Forest Service safety practices. From there, training will vary

according to the service needed. For example, demonstration training allows volunteers to watch experts perform a task before getting a chance to practice it themselves. Or training may take place through mentoring in which other employees, community members, or experienced long-term volunteers work with a new volunteer. Volunteer coordinators who can provide basic training and manage other volunteers are in high demand, especially in areas with limited staff. Also, local civic organizations, clubs, and volunteer groups sometimes offer lectures or provide basic safety training.

In the case of specialized volunteer service, more extensive training may be required. Some volunteer tasks require certification, such as when using certain tools, equipment, or vehicles. Some partners sponsor these more advanced trainings, such as Forest Service courses in leadership, trail building, and sawing certification. Other partners have online curricula and training centers.

4.9 Volunteers Background Checks

Volunteers may be subject to Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12, also known as HSPD-12, which requires non-employees serving in federal agencies and requiring access to computer systems and/or mission-critical facilities for six months or more throughout their career to undergo a background check. Volunteers serving in positions with unsupervised access to children are also subject to a background check, as are volunteers serving in other positions in which public safety is a main consideration.

A volunteer's supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the volunteer is put in Person Model, the USDA's database for storing and maintaining personnel identity records. The supervisor must also contact the Personnel Security department. The Personnel Security department will check the national database to look for an existing background investigation. If no previous investigation has been completed, then the Personnel Security department will request fingerprint cards as well as other paperwork that is required for the background investigation.

Note that some groups may have already completed background checks on their volunteers. If such background checks meets or exceeds the sensitivity code of the current position, is on file with the Office of Personnel Management, and the employee does not have a break in service, then it would be unnecessary for the Forest Service to complete additional, redundant background checks.



← 4.10 Volunteer Contacts

Persons interested in locating volunteer opportunities can use many avenues.

- Volunteer coordinators or someone with volunteer management responsibilities can be found at most local Forest Service offices. Individual office contact information can be located through the [Forest Service national Web site](#). Web site visitors should use the “Find a Forest or Grassland” feature at the top, right corner of the homepage to go to a specific national forest or grassland’s Web site.
- The appropriate regional volunteer coordinator can be found on the [Forest Service volunteer website](#).

- Many volunteer opportunities can also be found at www.volunteer.gov.
- The NFF maintains a [Friends of the Forest directory](#) which lists upcoming volunteer opportunities organized by NFF or other partner organizations.

4.11 Other Resources

- Learn more about volunteering with the Forest Service by navigating through the [Volunteer Program Web site](#).
- [SRI Foundation's Passport in Time program clearinghouse](#) offers professional education courses and educational opportunities in the field of historic preservation on Forest Service land.
- The NFF's Friends of the Forest program connects people who are interested in national forests with information about recreation, volunteering, and conservation via a monthly e-newsletter called tree-mail. People may sign up for the free newsletter by visiting <http://dev.becomeafriend.org/connect/treemail>.
- The [Take Pride in America Web site](#) offers resources for volunteers and connects volunteers with public land service opportunities with the Forest Service and elsewhere.
- The [Volunteers in the Forest Service: A Coordinators Guide](#) is a 139-page extensive resource for Forest Service volunteer coordinators published in 2009 and covering many useful volunteerism topics.
- Volunteer opportunities are posted in each issue and on the [Friends of the Forest website](#).
- [Wilderness Volunteers](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization created in 1997 to organize and promote volunteer service to America's wild lands. The group works with public land agencies, including the Forest Service.
- Forest Service Manual 1830 provides policy for managing the volunteer program, and additional resources can be found at <http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/rhwr/yvh/>.
- The [Forest Service Guide for Volunteers](#) offers more details for volunteers, as does the [Volunteer Web site](#).