

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 31, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Chief Tom Schultz  
U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins and Chief Schultz:

We write to notify you of concerns that have been brought to our attention regarding staffing issues at the Enchantments within the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, managed by the Wenatchee River Ranger District in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. The Enchantments are situated in the mountains overlooking the town of Leavenworth, which draws visitors from around the world.

According to contacts outside of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the district now staffs the Enchantments with just one employee, down from 11. As a result, basic services for the wilderness area have been severely diminished, which has resulted in overflowing toilets, risking runoff directly over an ecologically sensitive river that flows through town. There also remains a lack of capacity to enforce the area's permitting system or public use fire restrictions, also known as a burn ban. Reduced staffing also impacts the effectiveness of search and rescue efforts as first contact is often made by USFS employees closest to a caller in distress.

It is hard to overstate just how important the Enchantments are to our constituents across Washington state and the nation. The Enchantments earned its name from a topographer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who described finding "5 or 6 most beautiful small lakes grouped in a wonderful glacial valley all ringed with alpine larch." Since then, the pristine alpine region of central Washington has fielded millions of visits from hikers and backpackers who want to experience one of the most recognized and sought-after hiking destinations in the United States, contributing to the nearly \$100 million spent annually in communities around the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.<sup>1</sup> Backpackers will enter their names in a lottery year after year, hoping to win an overnight permit among the thousands of requests annually.

Before this year's reduction in staffing, USFS already had trouble keeping pace with the sheer volume of visitors to the area. Though the number of backpackers is limited by the USFS lottery system, day hikers are not and day visits have spiked 164% between 2013 and 2023. The influx has strained search and rescue resources, damaged the fragile ecosystem, and worsened issues with waste management.

Now, with just one employee responsible for thousands of acres of wilderness, land management by USFS is completely impossible and is burdening the local community to fill in the gaps. During a time of significant drought and wildfire risk, burn bans cannot be enforced or even adequately communicated, showcased by a recent account that we have heard of hikers having to stop others from lighting fireworks on the Fourth of July. Routine permit checks for either overnight backpacking or parking are no longer in practice. Human waste has overfilled many of the 31 backcountry toilets found throughout the area. In the Core and Colchuck zones, the fragile and rocky alpine environment simply don't have the soil type to contain or break down human waste in typical backcountry "catholes." This means that thousands of pounds of waste need to be flown out by

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<sup>1</sup> Benefits to People At a Glance Report. (n.d.). <https://www.fs.usda.gov/emc/economics/documents/at-a-glance/benefits-to-people/pacificnw/BTP-Okanogan-Wenatchee.pdf>

helicopter. The USFS has no capacity with only one employee to carry this out and must rely on volunteers, as the job requires two to three. These unglamorous but necessary operations require planning, coordination, and institutional knowledge. If the lack of waste maintenance is left unaddressed, we risk improper disposal by hikers, posing a threat to the water supply, human health, and ecological health of nearby lakes and the drainage system of Icicle Creek. The Enchantments' rocky soil means that any waste on the surface or shallowly buried will run off with rains and snowmelt right into the nearby watershed. This could compromise water quality for animals, hikers, and nearby rural communities.

Conditions at the Enchantments have already deteriorated, and there are still more than three months of the hiking and backpacking season. Volunteers and local communities are doing what they can to fill the gaps, but this is not sustainable or appropriate for basic operations on one of our most treasured public lands. Additional staffing is desperately needed to maintain basic operations at the Wenatchee River Ranger District.

It is our understanding that Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest has access to grant funding competitively awarded by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office to hire seasonal employees specifically at the Enchantments,<sup>2</sup> but that the hiring freeze and other federal administrative policies are preventing the Wenatchee River Ranger District from accessing these state dollars. These state funds are available right now, for this season, to alleviate the federal staffing issues that have occurred this year. We urge you to take necessary action to free up this state funding, earned competitively by the Wenatchee River Ranger District, in order to address severe staffing shortages in the Enchantments.

We respectfully request your immediate attention and action to safeguard the public health and economy of Washington state's rural communities and support some of our nation's most beautiful wilderness. Moving forward, we would like to work with you to ensure that in future years, this much-loved and visited recreation marvel has sufficient federal resources to meet the demands of peak season and continue to drive the outdoor economy in this rural area of our state. Thank you very much for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



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Kim Schrier, M.D.  
Member of Congress



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Adam Smith  
Member of Congress

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<sup>2</sup> WRRD Wilderness Education (Enchantments Emphasis). Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office. (n.d.). <https://secure.rco.wa.gov/prism/search/projectsnapshot.aspx?ProjectNumber=22-2040>