

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 23, 2026

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

Dear Chief Schultz:

In January, you shared your priorities for fiscal year 2026. Among your top objectives for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is a focus on “expanding access to the outdoors.” Associate Deputy Chief Gordon Blum expressed similar intentions during a recent hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources. We write with serious concern that, despite your stated intent to prioritize outdoor access and improve visitor experiences, the USFS trail maintenance operations have been hamstrung by layoffs, hiring restrictions, budget cuts and other policies that make it harder for staff to do their jobs and meet agency objectives.

As you know, the USFS manages over 164,000 miles of trails, more than any other land management agency including the National Park Service. Americans cherish the USFS trail network, which serve 84 million visitors annually. Public lands recreation contributes \$128 billion to our national economy. Outdoor recreation is an important economic driver for rural and Tribal communities near national forests and grasslands. Despite the clear value of trails and the agency’s stated focus on outdoor access, conditions on the ground are deteriorating.

A December 2025 Trail Program Status Report details that trail maintenance suffered dramatically in 2025. Total miles of USFS trails maintained in 2025 fell by 22%. Neglecting our recreational assets increases the long-term costs of maintaining these facilities and reduces opportunities for the American people to access the outdoors. The report underscored how recent actions have eliminated trail-focused positions in the USFS and undermined the agency's expertise in managing backcountry projects. Some of those lost skills include operating equipment, performing traditional construction techniques like rock wall masonry, volunteer coordination and project management. The report states, “Lost skills are weakening the agency’s ability to implement technical projects and oversee partner, volunteer and contractor work, which is leading to unpassable trails, unsafe bridges and negative environmental impacts.” The USFS also found “widespread burnout and declining morale” within the agency’s trail-focused workforce. USFS staff live and work in the communities we represent.

Over the last year, we have lost skilled workers, critical staff roles and vast amounts of local knowledge. At current staffing levels and with existing challenges, USFS has concluded that “many [ranger] districts are unable to conduct basic trail maintenance. Front-country trails are being prioritized; backcountry trails are being abandoned. Deferred maintenance is exponentially compounding.” Given that USFS has acknowledged these issues internally, it is imperative that our constituents understand how you plan to address the deterioration in outdoor access and better maintain trails this year.

We request responses to the following questions no later than March 31st, 2026:

1. How will the USFS address the issues in the report before the summer field season?
2. How will the USFS restore sufficient staffing to prevent the proliferation of “unpassable trails, unsafe bridges and negative environmental impacts” as detailed in this report?

3. We understand the USFS has recently authorized national forests to hire a limited number of seasonal temporary recreation positions, commonly referred to by the agency as 1039s. Hiring seasonal recreation staff is a positive step compared to 2025 when forests could not hire temporary seasonal trail crews and wilderness rangers, but the USFS is still limiting overall hiring. Is the agency planning to continue limiting the number of seasonal staff who can be hired regardless of the funding source for these positions?
4. If a national forest has outside grants, local funding and other non-appropriated dollars available, how does the public benefit from restricting national forests' use of those resources to hire seasonal staff and implement on-the-ground projects?
5. The Trail Program Status Report notes that the USFS currently limits the seasons for Permanent Seasonal Employee (PSE) positions even when those staff are externally funded or responding to natural disasters. Does the USFS plan to increase flexibility around PSE positions in FY26 to better utilize its existing workforce to address the problems detailed in this report?
6. How does the USFS plan to address challenges with grant and agreements capacity so that partners and volunteers can better support agency priorities?

Thank you for your attention to this pressing matter. We look forward to working with you to ensure the Forest Service meets its trail maintenance obligations to support continued safe and responsible recreation on public lands.

Sincerely,



Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress



Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Angie Craig
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on
Agriculture



Kevin Mullin
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Joe Neguse
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Subcommittee
on Federal Lands



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Suzan K. DelBene
Member of Congress



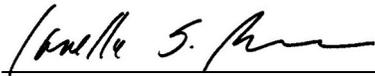
Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



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