

FOREST SERVICE TRAILS

Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability

Why GAO Did This Study

The Forest Service manages more than 158,000 miles of recreational trails offering hikers, horseback riders, cyclists, off-highway-vehicle drivers, and others access to national forests. To remain safe and usable, these trails need regular maintenance, such as removal of downed trees or bridge repairs. GAO was asked to review the agency's trail maintenance activities. This report examines (1) the extent to which the Forest Service is meeting trail maintenance needs, and effects associated with any maintenance not done; (2) resources, including funding and labor, that the agency employs to maintain its trails; (3) factors, if any, complicating agency efforts to maintain its trails; and (4) options, if any, that could improve the agency's trail maintenance efforts. GAO reviewed laws and agency documents; analyzed Forest Service budget data for fiscal years 2006-2012 and trails data for fiscal years 2008-2012; and interviewed agency officials and representatives of 16 stakeholder groups selected to represent trail users, conservation, and industry. Their views are not generalizable.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other actions, that the Forest Service (1) analyze trails program needs and available resources and develop options for narrowing the gap between them and take steps to assess and improve the sustainability of its trails and (2) take steps to enhance training on collaborating with and managing volunteers who help maintain trails. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-13-618](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Forest Service has more miles of trail than it has been able to maintain, resulting in a persistent maintenance backlog with a range of negative effects. In fiscal year 2012, the agency reported that it accomplished at least some maintenance on about 37 percent of its 158,000 trail miles and that about one-quarter of its trail miles met the agency's standards. The Forest Service estimated the value of its trail maintenance backlog to be \$314 million in fiscal year 2012, with an additional \$210 million for annual maintenance, capital improvement, and operations. Trails not maintained to quality standards have a range of negative effects, such as inhibiting trail use and harming natural resources, and deferring maintenance can add to maintenance costs.

The Forest Service relies on a combination of internal and external resources to help maintain its trail system. Internal resources include about \$80 million allocated annually for trail maintenance activities plus funding for other agency programs that involve trails. External resources include volunteer labor, which the Forest Service valued at \$26 million in fiscal year 2012, and funding from federal programs, states, and other sources.

Collectively, agency officials and stakeholders GAO spoke with identified a number of factors complicating the Forest Service's trail maintenance efforts, including (1) factors associated with the origin and location of trails, (2) some agency policies and procedures, and (3) factors associated with the management of volunteers and other external resources. For example, many trails were created for purposes other than recreation, such as access for timber harvesting or firefighting, and some were built on steep slopes, leaving unsustainable, erosion-prone trails that require continual maintenance. In addition, certain agency policies and procedures complicate trail maintenance efforts, such as the agency's lack of standardized training in trails field skills, which limits agency expertise. Further, while volunteers are important to the agency's trail maintenance efforts, managing volunteers can decrease the time officials can spend performing on-the-ground maintenance.

Agency officials and stakeholders GAO interviewed collectively identified numerous options to improve Forest Service trail maintenance, including (1) assessing the sustainability of the trail system, (2) improving agency policies and procedures, and (3) improving management of volunteers and other external resources. In a 2010 document titled *A Framework for Sustainable Recreation*, the Forest Service noted the importance of analyzing recreation program needs and available resources and assessing potential ways to narrow the gap between them, which the agency has not yet done for its trails. Many officials and stakeholders suggested that the agency systematically assess its trail system to identify ways to reduce the gap and improve trail system sustainability. They also identified other options for improving management of volunteers. For example, while the agency's goal in the *Forest Service Manual* is to use volunteers, the agency has not established collaboration with and management of volunteers who help maintain trails as clear expectations for trails staff responsible for working with volunteers, and training in this area is limited. Some agency officials and stakeholders stated that training on how to collaborate with and manage volunteers would enhance the agency's ability to capitalize on this resource.