

Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative for National Forests

Maintain current level \$90 million funding for Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Program in fiscal year 2012

The financially responsible Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Program that Congress created in fiscal year 2008 demonstrates wide-ranging economic and environmental benefits for national forests. This U.S. Forest Service program saves taxpayer dollars and creates jobs in rural communities. It protects drinking water supplies, enhances fish and wildlife habitat, and improves recreational access.

The program focuses on eliminating sediment runoff from failing logging roads. Muddy runoff from the roads threatens clean drinking water and important habitat for threatened and endangered salmon. In addition, the program works to ensure reliable, consistent recreational access to public lands.

During the first three years of the program, the Forest Service allocated Legacy Roads and Trails funding to repair 1,160 culverts, maintain 5,126 miles of road, maintain or improve 2,593 miles of trails, and decommission 2,713 miles of road nationally. This program is remarkably good for Washington and for the nation, too.

The Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative (WWRI) is a coalition of 20 groups that work in Washington State to address the problems stemming from decades of under investment in our aging national forest road system. Since the passage of the Northwest Forest Plan in the mid 1990s, Region 6 of the Forest Service has taken a leadership role in protecting its forest watersheds to improve resource and access conditions. WWRI strongly supports the continuation of funding for the Legacy Roads and Trails program and recommends that the program be funded at the current level of \$90 million in fiscal year 2012.

Right-sizing the road system

In fiscal year 2012, the Forest Service will begin the process of right-sizing its road system. This means, it will create a road system that is both economically and ecologically sustainable. Each of the national forests will perform a science-based analysis of the harm each of its roads has on drinking water, wildlife and fisheries, while still considering management needs for fire, forestry, recreation and private access to in-holdings.

The assessment will also balance Forest Service books by matching its available annual road maintenance funding to its annual maintenance needs, with the goal of creating a fiscally and environmentally sustainable road system.



This sensible process acknowledges the constraints created by the limited budget available for the road system and the impact of that system on critical resources and access. Funding from the Legacy Roads and Trails program can assist in this right-sizing process. Developing a plan for an appropriately sized, ecologically-sound, and safe and efficient road system will create a blueprint for future Legacy Roads and Trails fund expenditures — allowing individual forests to efficiently and effectively allocate limited road maintenance and road reclamation dollars from Legacy Roads and Trails and other funding sources.

Ron Gold (below, center) of RG Forestry Consultant, Hoodspport, WA said, *“Legacy Roads and Trails funding has been critical for the survival of my 25-year-old company. I’ve been able to keep 10 people working because of this program during this severe economic downturn. Over the years, the nature of my work has changed and now there is more emphasis in restoration work, decommissioning and repairing roads and replacing fish culverts, to reduce landslides and protect water quality in the region.”*



The problem

Deteriorating, unmaintained and poorly designed national forest roads contribute sediment-laden runoff into streams, making them wider, shallower and more susceptible to warming by the sun.

Muddy water created by sediments from failing and washed-out roads harms endangered and dwindling runs of salmon that need cold, clear water to thrive and reproduce. Muddy water harms the gills of salmon and trout and smothers fish eggs when silt settles into clean gravel beds. Sediments foul drinking water and increase the need for expensive community water filtration systems. Failing roads also threaten recreational opportunities, important for hunters, hikers, boaters and anglers who count on reliable access to Forest Service lands.

Climate change has produced greater variability in the volume and timing of precipitation, causing more flooding and droughts. Unless we storm-proof our forest watersheds, the price tag for fixing these sub-standard roads will continue to increase. Similar conditions occur today on thousands of miles of national forest roads in Washington and across the nation due to a chronic lack of federal investment in necessary repairs and maintenance. The situation continues to deteriorate yearly.

Legacy Roads and Trails funding specifically addresses problems derived from the Forest Service’s over-sized, frail road system. The funding helps with the maintenance of necessary roads, reclamation of unnecessary or problem roads, and repair of trails, fish culverts, and bridges. It also helps protect the large investments that Tribes, states, and the federal government have made towards salmon recovery in the Pacific Northwest downstream of Forest Service lands. Furthermore, Legacy Road and Trails funds are being employed to develop the plan for a fiscally-balanced and ecologically-sound right-sized road system over the next five years.

Washed out culverts make it impossible for endangered salmon to swim upstream and spawn.



Legacy Roads and Trails Program solutions

The Solution Part I: *Fiscal Responsibility*

Prolonged underfunding of road maintenance and reclamation in national forests in Washington State has created a \$300 million backlog of work (estimated in 2005). This is part of a national backlog that is now estimated to range from \$4.5 billion to \$8.4 billion — a price tag that is increasing annually.

Although the harvest of timber-created the vast majority of the roads in the forest road system, reduced harvest has led to less revenue for maintenance. We now have a legacy that is a vast network of unused roads. These unmaintained roads harm water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and reduce public access to key recreation sites.

Because forest roads degrade within five to seven years, it's important that the Forest Service reduce the overall size of the system to allow it to create a road system it can afford into the future. Due to past funding, only 20 percent of the entire system currently meets adequate road standards. By right-sizing the road system and decreasing annual road maintenance costs, the fiscal burden on federal taxpayers will be reduced significantly over time.

The Solution Part II: *Family-Wage Jobs in Rural Forested Communities*

Jobs restoring national forest watersheds put people back to work. National forests have always been an important source of jobs in rural, forested communities, but declines in the timber harvests have caused serious economic challenges. Although the current economic crisis hits these communities especially hard, Legacy Road and Trails dollars can stimulate local economies. A Forest Service job-creation model projects that between 13.3 and 17.2 jobs could be created for each million dollars spent nationally in the Legacy Roads and Trails Program. Under this projection, the \$90 million created or retained between 1,200 and 1,550 jobs nationally in fiscal year 2010.

The Solution Part III: *Enhanced Water Quality*

The Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) is the delegated administrator of the federal Clean Water Act in Washington. Ecology has a long-term relationship with the Forest Service to prevent water pollution from forest management practices. Most of the current problems are a result of lack of maintenance leading to road sediment entering streams. In 2000, Ecology signed an agreement with the Forest Service that set a timeline to improve the national forest road system in Washington by 2016 to prevent further harm from pollution and excess sediment derived from national forest roads. The Forest Service has es-

timated that it will cost approximately \$300 million to bring Washington's national forests roads into compliance with today's standards beyond the maintenance monies they currently receive. Legacy Roads and Trails funding is beginning to move the Forest Service in the right direction by reclaiming unneeded roads and fixing culvert problems and chronic sedimentation issues on needed roads. This will prevent millions of tons of sediments from entering Washington's waters.

The Solution Part IV: *Improved Access to National Forest Lands*

Visitor use of national forest land continues to increase while the quality of the road system continues to degrade. National forests provide the greatest diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities in the world, connecting the public with nature in an unmatched variety of settings and activities. Roads that provide access to national forest lands connect the public to a wide range of outdoor recreation. Recreation provides economic benefits to communities, regions, and the nation. Using Legacy Roads and Trails funding not only helps maintain roads needed for access but also pays for trails and bridges. Funding can also be used to help plan for a high-quality, fiscally affordable road system that will provide reliable and safe access for forest visitors.

The Solution Part V: *Resource Improvement*

Repairing or retrofitting fish passage culverts is critical to manage peak water flows during storms and flooding to assist preventing the likelihood of landslides, road blockage or destroyed habitat. Improved road drainage allows greater water infiltration into the forest floor and prevents the expansion of the drainage network. This reduces harm to important fish and wildlife habitat and cultural sites. Right-sizing the road system will reduce fragmentation of wildlife habitat and impede the spread of non-native invasive plants, pests and pathogens.



WWRI's recommendations for fiscal year 2012

1. Maintain Legacy Roads and Trails funding at \$90 million in FY2012.

To meet the need, Legacy Roads and Trails funding must at least remain level at \$90 million for fiscal year 2012. Washington's Legacy Roads and Trails funding was \$7.9 million in 2010 and a comparable amount in 2011 under the Continuing Resolution Authority. With that level of funding our progress will be slow and it will take more than 40 years to address our state's national forest roads problem. Funding from Legacy Roads and Trails gives national forests in Washington a chance to begin complying with the road maintenance timelines the Forest Service committed to in 2000 and that state and large private owners are striving to meet under the Forest Practices Habitat Conservation Plan.

2. Use a portion of Legacy Roads and Trails funding for planning to right-size the road system.

Reclaiming unneeded and environmentally problematic roads and repairing needed roads is the first step towards restoring fully-functioning, healthy watersheds, and clean water for the American people. A portion of Legacy Roads and Trails funding should be used to support the Forest Service's five-year plan to right-size the road system while simultaneously identifying roads that are no longer needed to meet forest resource management objectives.

The impassible road 26 above the Suiattle River in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The river cut into the hillside below the road leading to road failure.

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