

STAFFING FOR NATIONAL FOREST HEALTH, PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY

What: Make our national forests healthier, more sustainable, and productive by: (1) ending the “stepping-stone” culture within the USFS, (2) hiring management staff with a strong silvicultural background appropriate to the forest they will work on, (3) prioritizing hiring to support active, sustainable forest management activities rather than bureaucracy, (4) fixing the lengthy and cumbersome hiring process, (5) establishing performance measures and rewards that focus on forest productivity and health, and (6) utilizing more local contracting to make up for staff shortages.



Why: Staffing levels and policies within the USFS create many issues that hinder the appropriate and necessary management of our national forests. By the same token, Legislative and Executive branch actions hinder the agency’s ability to staff and achieve forest management goals and needs.

There are many highly qualified, experienced, and dedicated forest managers in the USFS, but management level positions are too often filled with staff that do not have the silvicultural background and training appropriate to leading forest management planning and activities. Also, filling positions in the East from staff at other forests in the West or South does not serve the forest well, as their training and experience may not be suitable for the forest they would be moving to.

Constantly shuffling staff, encouraging them (especially leadership) to move up the ladder every couple of years, hampers a unit’s ability to meet its management plan goals and keeps staff off-balance with each leadership change. At least ten years should be required for any assignment to ensure stability in leadership through implementation of a forest’s management plan. Timber marking crews are another example of a position that is often used as a stepping-stone, creating a constant need to fill positions critical to forest management and timber sale preparation.

Rewarding those who spend their careers at a particular forest and achieving or exceeding goals would be better for the forests, the employees, and the communities that host and collaborate with the forest staff. This would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency as a whole.

Prioritizing hiring to support active forest management and silvicultural research is crucial to restoring the health and productivity of our national forests. Filling these positions, correcting the agency’s hiring and performance policies, and returning the USFS to its purpose of providing a sustainable supply of timber to meet the nation’s needs (getting our national forests back to stable and sustainable timber harvest targets on every unit) are the path that will lead to healthier forests and the agency’s ability to pay for its forest management activities, including staffing.

We strongly urge the USFS to utilize local contracting when filling staff positions is not possible. There are qualified professionals and businesses in most forest host communities that can provide the skills and services needed to help forest units efficiently meet their management goals.

Side note: We would also like to see a hiring and employment policy that would ensure the people working for the USFS are not opposed to the sustainable yield timber harvest purpose of the agency and will not use their positions to achieve their opposing personal ideologies.

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Background:

America's national forests are suffering from decades of neglect, due in part to the staffing issues listed on page one of this proposal. However, both issues really began with the drastic and long-running reduction in timber sale volumes that have a major impact on forest units' ability to support their own management costs (staffing). Not only are Units unable to meet their management plan goals, but they struggle to deal with unexpected events (i.e. wind, ice, or fire) and invasive plants, pests and diseases. Overcrowded forests have become more susceptible to these threats, as well as wildfire.

On the Allegheny National Forest (ANF), located in northwestern Pennsylvania, we have seen an increase in all these threats, as well as wildfire, which is not common here. Wind and ice events are more common on the ANF and can result in the loss of hundreds or even thousands of trees with a value in the millions of dollars. Salvage is rarely achieved, and usually after pressure to do so, due to staffing limitations.

We have lost tens of millions of dollars in Ash trees on the ANF due to the invasive Emerald Ash Borer because the USFS did not do a preemptory salvage harvest, which could have helped stop the pest. Black Cherry, once the ANF/Allegheny Plateau's claim to worldwide fame, is dying on the stump due to disease. Loss of the value of these trees could be prevented by harvesting them at maturity, before the disease damages them.

Our purpose in discussing the financial losses is the fact that national forest host communities depend on the 1908 Act or Secure Rural Schools funding they receive from the USFS. The massive presence of these public lands has a serious impact on their host communities' tax base, meaning that these funds can make up the majority of a community's annual revenues.

The Allegheny Forest Alliance was created in 1997 because of the halt to timber harvest on the ANF due to radical environmentalists' protests and lawsuits. The economic impact on schools and municipalities was devastating, resulting in business closures, cuts to services, population loss, etc. We supported the USFS/ANF in those lawsuits, helped to write the Secure Rural Schools legislation to compensate communities for the decrease in timber harvest and 1908 Act revenues (See chart <https://www.fs.usda.gov/forestmanagement/aboutus/histperspective.shtml>), and held the agency and ANF accountable to its management plan and multiple-use, sustained yield mandate.

Our organization's mission was, and continues to be, ensuring a healthy and sustainably productive forest to support the economic stability of our communities. We look forward to working with the USDA and USFS in achieving our shared goals.

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