

WAG TALES 2026

CHIEF'S WILDERNESS ADVISORY GROUP ANNUAL NEWSLETTER



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Acting Director, Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

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Acting Director's Introduction

"...and these shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness...." -Public Law 88-577, Section 2(a), September 3, 1964

On a recent family trip to North Carolina, we planned a day hike into Shining Rock Wilderness on the Pisgah National Forest, one of the original wilderness designations under the 1964 Wilderness Act. The hike did not go entirely as expected, and, in fact, we didn't actually step foot in the wilderness that day. But as I gazed out from the ridgeline trail at the expansive view of the wilderness destination I had hoped to reach that day, any potential tinge of disappointment was washed away by an incredible feeling of gratitude. I was enjoying what the day had brought rather than fretting about what it hadn't. And I was heartened by the reminder of the Wilderness Act's promise of future use and enjoyment of these areas as wilderness—a promise that is only fulfilled through the work of wilderness stewards like you.

Congress declared in 1964 that it intended to secure an "enduring resource of wilderness." The people and institutions charged with carrying out that intent must also be enduring. Thank you for the commitment you consistently demonstrate to carry out the wide range of Forest Service responsibilities for stewarding the National Wilderness Preservation System. This issue of WAG Tales is an excellent sampling of that dedication to wilderness stewardship. The work you do may not always achieve the goals you set each day, but your passion, expertise, and resilience is as inspiring as the wild landscapes you manage.

Steve Chesterton
Acting Director, Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

The Chief's Priorities: Connecting 'Back-to-Basics' Forest Service Priorities with Wilderness Stewardship

Federally designated wilderness within the United States Forest Service provides an important component of the agency's broader land stewardship responsibilities under the United States Department of Agriculture. While wilderness is governed by the direction of the Wilderness Act of 1964 to preserve wilderness character and natural conditions, the program strongly complements the Chief's "back-to-basics" priorities. **Wilderness stewardship contributes to public safety, wildfire resilience, healthy landscapes, sustainable recreation access, and durable partnerships**—demonstrating that wilderness protection and the agency's operational priorities are mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives.



Mount Hood Wilderness. Snow Cat on search and rescue mission (Tom Iraci)

Wildfire readiness and response priorities also intersect directly with wilderness stewardship. Although wilderness areas are managed to allow natural ecological processes to function with minimal manipulation, they still play a role in the broader wildfire strategy of the National Forest System. Many wilderness landscapes serve as locations where **natural fire can contribute to long-term ecosystem resilience** when conditions allow, while still enabling coordinated suppression when fires threaten life, property, or adjacent communities. Wilderness areas also contribute to landscape-scale resilience by maintaining **intact ecosystems, functioning watersheds, and natural fuel patterns** that help managers better understand fire behavior across larger forested landscapes.



Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Wilderness Rangers paddling to work in the fog. (Dan Disch)



Lake and burned area in Flat Tops Wilderness (Tom Flowers)

Safety remains the foundation of wilderness management, consistent with the agency's core operational culture. Wilderness staff, field crews, and fire personnel routinely work in remote environments where risk management is essential. From trail maintenance and search-and-rescue

coordination to fire response in remote terrain, **wilderness operations emphasize situational awareness, preparedness, and employee safety.** These practices reinforce the agency's broader commitment that safety must be the first and last step of every operation, whether responding to wildfire, maintaining backcountry infrastructure, or managing visitor use in rugged landscapes.



Canadian River Potential Wilderness Area (Tom Lowrimore)

The Chief's Priorities: Connecting 'Back-to-Basics' Forest Service Priorities with Wilderness Stewardship



Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Hiking through the 1988 burn (Josh Whitmore)



Welcome Creek Wilderness (Josh Nadas) Santa Rosa Wilderness (Brad Eells)



Molly Beattie Wilderness



Anaconda Pintler Wilderness (Wilderness Institute)

The Chief's focus on **active forest management, disaster recovery, and landscape restoration** also connects to wilderness stewardship through ecological integrity and watershed protection. While commercial timber production, grazing expansion, and mineral development generally occur outside designated wilderness, **wilderness areas serve as ecological benchmarks that inform management across surrounding multiple-use lands**. These landscapes provide reference conditions for forest health, wildlife habitat, hydrology, and climate resilience. Following natural disasters such as wildfire, flood, or storms, wilderness management emphasizes natural recovery processes while coordinating with adjacent forest management efforts that focus on reforestation, fuels treatment, and infrastructure restoration.

Recreation access and visitor experience priorities are strongly aligned with wilderness management as well. Wilderness areas provide some of the most sought-after outdoor experiences in the country—**opportunities for solitude, primitive recreation, and immersion in undeveloped landscapes**. By maintaining trails, protecting natural soundscapes, and managing visitor impacts, wilderness programs help meet the agency's goal of **expanding access to the outdoors while preserving the qualities** that make these places unique. Investments in trail systems, visitor information, and responsible recreation education ensure that growing visitation can occur safely and sustainably.

Finally, wilderness stewardship reflects the Chief's priorities around **deregulation, organizational efficiency, and partnerships**. Effective wilderness management relies heavily on collaboration with state agencies, Tribal governments, local communities, volunteers, and conservation partners. These partnerships expand the agency's capacity to conduct trail work, ecological monitoring, restoration projects, and visitor education. By empowering field-level decision making and strengthening shared stewardship relationships, the wilderness program helps demonstrate how the Forest Service can deliver mission-critical work efficiently while maintaining strong public trust.

Wilderness stewardship supports the Chief's priorities by **contributing to safety, wildfire resilience, ecological integrity, recreation access, and collaborative land management**. Managed consistent with the direction of the Wilderness Act of 1964, these landscapes remain essential to the Forest Service mission—providing ecological benchmarks, resilient watersheds, and world-class recreation opportunities while reinforcing the agency's commitment to stewarding public lands for current and future generations.

Traditional Tools: Rising to the Occasion

Using the minimum tool necessary in response to Hurricane Helene (Sept 2024) and a record breaking wind storm in the Black Hills (December 2025)
Hurricane Helene Response



Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards

When Hurricane Helene swept across the Southern Appalachians, the damage across our wilderness landscapes was immediate and overwhelming. Downed trees blanketed trails, access routes were cut off, and

communities across the region were facing urgent needs. In the first weeks following the storm, SAWS shifted our crews away from the forests and into the communities that surround them. Staff and volunteers helped gut flooded buildings, remove drywall, deliver firewood to isolated residents, distribute food, and support recovery efforts in places like North Cove Elementary School, Yancey County, and Asheville's River Arts District. In times like these, stewardship means showing up for people first.



Crew member Trae Shadegg removes large more than 25 DBH red oak from remote sections of the Appalachian Trail in Pond Mountain Wilderness.



Crew members stand on downed trees across the Appalachian Trail suspended more than 10 feet in the air prior to logging out the popular trail in Pond Mountain Wilderness, Tennessee.



SAWS crews were pivoted from forest stewardship and trail work to assist in Hurricane Helene Relief work right after the storm including working at food distribution centers at West Yancey Volunteer Fire Department in North Carolina.

As winter approached, attention began turning back to the wilderness areas that had been hit hardest. The scale of damage across some Appalachian Trail sections raised concerns about whether trails in designated wilderness could realistically be reopened using traditional tools alone. With hundreds of trees across long, remote stretches of trail, some believed chainsaws would be necessary to accomplish the work safely and efficiently. SAWS asked for the opportunity to try. Within one week, we assembled and deployed a professional trail crew into the Big Laurel Branch and Pond Mountain Wilderness areas under freezing winter conditions. The team included high-level certified crosscut sawyers and experienced wilderness stewards trained to work safely with traditional tools.



SAWS partners with ACE and Wild South to help remove downed trees in freezing conditions in remote trail sections of the Linville Gorge Wilderness, North Carolina.



Hurricane spike crew removes hundreds of down trees with crosscut saws in Pond Mountain Wilderness, Tennessee.



SAWS crew member, Kevin Mathews, uses a crosscut saw single buck style to safely remove suspended oak from Big Laurel Branch Wilderness, Tennessee.

Hurricane Helene Response

Over the next six weeks, that small crew cleared more than 600 downed trees across roughly twenty miles of trail, including critical sections of the Appalachian Trail. In some areas, trees were stacked more than fifteen feet high. Despite the scale of the storm damage and the remote nature of the work, the crew completed the project safely using only crosscut saws and hand tools, with zero injuries.

The effort demonstrated something important. Even after one of the largest storms the region has seen, traditional tools remain effective for wilderness stewardship. They protect wilderness character while still allowing partners and agencies to respond quickly and responsibly to major disturbances.

Today, SAWS is entering the next phase of recovery. In response to the scale of Hurricane Helene's impacts, we are expanding our field capacity and placing more trained stewardship professionals on the ground than ever before. Dozens of new staff have joined the organization, bringing strong trail, rigging, and wilderness stewardship skills to help restore access across the region.

The work ahead will take years. Storm damage stretches across multiple forests, districts, and wilderness areas. But with strong partnerships, skilled crews, and a shared commitment to protecting these landscapes, we are ready to meet the challenge. Wilderness has always demanded patience, humility, and collaboration. Hurricane Helene reminded us of that. It also reminded us that when partners come together with the right tools and the right people, even the biggest obstacles can be cleared one cut at a time.



Saw noodles created after testing a freshly sharpened crosscut saw placed on top of a SAWS uniform.



Hurricane spike crew leaves for their first hitch to clear remote sections of the Appalachian Trail in ice and snow in Pond Wilderness, Tennessee.



Above: Retired marine recon and wilderness volunteer Michael Funk was among the few with the skill to assist the US Forest Service with initial damage assessments immediately after the hurricane. (photo: Scott Campbell)

Wild South

Wild South focused in the Linville Gorge Wilderness. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of trees down on the trails. The binds were complex. The vertical terrain hid huge boulders destabilized when tree roots ripped apart the landscape. Every worksite was a case study in risk mitigation. And yet everyone involved was committed to using traditional tools. It was a testament to the wilderness vision -- still alive and well in the Nation's original designated wilderness. It was a testament to the efficacy of today's saw training program -- fostering a focus on objectives while guiding sawyers safely toward greater skill.



Left: Volunteers pack out tires and other trash washed into the wilderness area by hurricane flooding. (photo: Kevin Massey)

Right: A joint saw team from SAWS and Wild South ford the river at dawn, ready to spend the day clearing hurricane trees off the Linville Gorge Trail. (photo: Nick Massey)



Hurricane Helene Response

The most broadly-applicable lesson was about the power of partnerships. After the hurricane, partner organizations immediately stepped in to cooperate with the US Forest Service. This rapid response wasn't magic. It was the direct result of many years of strategic emphasis on partner capacity development. The Pisgah National Forest in general -- and the Grandfather Ranger District in particular -- is home to one of the great success stories of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. That program helped build working relationships and a culture of practical, project-based partnerships. Those partners were ready when the call came. Linville Gorge is one of those high-visitation wilderness areas, where the tenets of wilderness are always under stress. A little over a decade ago, the US Forest Service decided to turn this problem into a solution. They deliberately developed a shared understanding with the community, and invested in partnerships to engage volunteers in restoring and preserving wilderness values. Many of these volunteers have deep knowledge of the landscape, and some have advanced backcountry navigation skills apt to the challenging terrain. It was hand-picked volunteers -- coordinated by partner organizations -- who powered the rapid assessment of trail impacts after the hurricane. This timely assessment led directly to an accurate and effective request to Congress for disaster supplemental funding.



Volunteers use a rope puller and teamwork to haul a battered kerosene tank out of the Linville River. Packing hurricane flood debris out of the wilderness area will take years. (photo: Kevin Massey)



In between his seasons with the Carson Hotshots in NM, Jon Massey volunteers to help hurricane recovery efforts in NC. (photo: Ben Shaw)

This area is still feeling the long-term economic impacts of Hurricane Helene. Our communities depend on National Forest in many ways, including outdoor recreation in wilderness and wild & scenic rivers. These communities are being given opportunities to help restore the place they love, and their contributions are making a critical difference.

Restoring Black Elk Wilderness Trails After Record-Breaking December 2025 Wind Storm

On December 18, 2025, a historic windstorm tore through western South Dakota, with the National Weather Service recording record-breaking gusts of up to 101 mph. The physical damage to infrastructure across the Black Hills was estimated at over \$4.6 million and the impact on our natural resources and wilderness area was just as staggering. Within the Hell Canyon Ranger District, the trail systems, the arteries of the forest, were essentially severed. The heart of the damage lay within and around Black Elk Wilderness. The challenge of clearing these trails is unique: per the Wilderness Act, the use of mechanized equipment is strictly prohibited. This meant that the use of chainsaws was not possible. Every single downed tree had to be addressed with "primitive" tools, which in this case meant the crosscut saw and the axe.



Black Elk Wilderness Boundary Hike In. (photo: David Mucklow)

Restoring Black Elk Wilderness Trails After Record-Breaking December 2025 Wind Storm

In the wake of the storm, the logistics were daunting. Personnel were looking at over 50 miles of hiking trails rendered impassable to both hikers and stock. Forest employees and dedicated volunteers, including the Black Hills Backcountry Horsemen, quickly got to work after the storm to inventory the destruction. The final tally was sobering: over 870 trees down across the trail system, with 792 of those located within the wilderness boundary, requiring removal via non-motorized or mechanized tools.



Axe work. (Photo: David Mucklow)



Sawyers using crosscuts. (Photo: David Mucklow)



Bucking large diameter tree. (Photo: David Mucklow)



Black Hills Crosscut Bucking Training. (Photo: David Mucklow)

The complexity of the blowdown was extreme. In many areas, trees weren't just down; they were "jack-strawed," creating tension-loaded puzzles of timber that required high-level technical skill to safely untangle. Trail #9 South, the primary trail from Custer State Park into the wilderness, was particularly hard-hit with over 60 individual trees blocking the path just yards across the wilderness boundary. With no dedicated trails crew currently on the Hell Canyon Ranger District, Forest personnel leaned heavily on partners and internal resources for a massive cleanup coordination effort. The District saw incredible support from: North, Central, and South Zone Fire Crews; Black Hills Hotshot and Helitack Crews; Hell Canyon Fire leadership and coordination; Hell Canyon District Heritage Staff; Hell Canyon District Timber Staff; and Custer State Park Staff, whose collaboration allowed regular access into the wilderness.

One of the biggest hurdles during the cleanup effort was the shortage of crosscut-certified personnel. In mid-February, North, Central and South Zone fire personnel in collaboration with the Regional Office and Black Hills Backcountry Horsemen dispatched crosscut saw instructors to help bridge the gap. In a true show of community, USFS and partner saw trainers Jim Allen, Sid Hall, Lisa McClure, David Mucklow and Brian Teets assisted in a certification push that resulted in over a dozen new sawyers for the forest.



Black Hills Crosscut Saw Training Scenario. (Photo: David Mucklow)

Restoring Black Elk Wilderness Trails After Record-Breaking December 2025 Wind Storm



Trail #9S looking West towards the Wilderness Boundary (Before & After)



Jack straw. (Photo: David Mucklow)

Because of this surge in manpower and expertise, every trail was successfully cleared by the end of February, and the Great Sioux Nation was able to complete their annual pilgrimage hike to Black Elk Peak. During the annual event a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was finalized, which was signed by eleven Sioux tribes and Black Hill National Forest Supervisor Shawn Cochran. The agreement outlines a process for ongoing consultation, shared stewardship, and coordinated management of the Black Elk Wilderness. “Establishing this agreement will enhance consultation, collaboration and co-stewardship of the Black Elk Wilderness with the Great Sioux Nation Tribes,” said **Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz**. “This agreement focuses on active management for recreation, habitat improvement, wildlife benefit, invasive species mitigation and wilderness management.”

However, the work is far from over. The initial 100 mph gusts destabilized many standing trees, and the Forest is now seeing a "second wave" of downed trees during subsequent, smaller wind events.



Sawyers using crosscuts. (Photo: David Mucklow)



Lost Cabin Creek bridge – Black Elk Wilderness (Before & After)

This clean-up effort was more than just a maintenance project; it was a testament to the minimum required philosophy of wilderness management. It proved that even in the face of historic natural disasters, we can restore access to our most primitive landscapes using the same tools used by those who first mapped them.

As we move into the 2026 season, the cleanup will remain an ongoing mission. A huge thank you to everyone who picked up a handle, packed in gear, or helped map the damage. We'll see you out on the trails.

RANGER TO RANGER

CHANGING SEASONS: WINTER WILDERNESS RANGERS

When most people picture a wilderness ranger, they see a horseback rider leading a pack mule or a hiker with a bulging pack full of tools on summer trails. This issue, we turn the lens to winter — a season that is changing faster than ever. Four rangers from Colorado's national forests share how they are adapting to shifting snowpack, new ultra-light gear, and a year-round field season.

Advances in outdoor equipment like lightweight ski touring gear and ultra-light camping supplies, as well as lighter and more powerful over-snow motorized vehicles, are allowing more users to reach deeper into the winter backcountry. Places once rarely visited in winter — like remote Colorado peaks — now see hundreds of backcountry skiers chasing summit turns on the 14ers.



Wilderness boundary sign

MEET THE RANGERS

Sam Massman, Acting District Ranger, Dillon District, White River NF

Oversees more than 1 million acres across Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan, Holy Cross, Maroon Bells, Flat Tops, and Collegiate Peaks wilderness areas.

Eli Rosenstein, Recreation Operations Manager, Hahns Peak/Bears Ears District, Routt NF

Leads winter wilderness work in the Mount Zirkel Wilderness

Dale Franchina, Wilderness Ranger, South Platte District, Pike-San Isabel NF

Responsible for data collection, upward reporting, and partnership coordination for Mount Evans and Lost Creek wilderness areas.

Rylan Sloan, Recreation Staff Officer, South Platte District, Pike-San Isabel NF

Co-leads Mount Evans and Lost Creek Wilderness Management; relies heavily on volunteer and partner monitoring networks to track winter conditions.

THE CHANGING WINTER LANDSCAPE

Warmer, shorter winters are shrinking high-quality snow into fewer locations — pushing more users into smaller areas. Meanwhile, lighter gear and more powerful snowmobiles are opening terrain that was once naturally protected by its remoteness.

WILDERNESS AREAS AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Sam Massman's program on the Dillon District covers over 1 million acres across six wilderness areas: Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan, Holy Cross, Maroon Bells, Flat Tops, and Collegiate Peaks. His primary focus is protecting wilderness character, inventorying trail conditions, and coordinating high-use access permits such as those for the Maroon Bells.

Ryan Sloan and Dale Franchina serve as the lead district for both Mount Evans Wilderness (shared with Clear Creek District) and Lost Creek Wilderness (shared with South Park District). Dale handles data collection, upward reporting, and coordination with partner agencies and volunteer groups.

Eli Rosenstein focuses primarily on Mount Zirkel Wilderness, where in winter his team concentrates on maintaining signage and monitoring for snowmobile encroachment.



Braden White, David Mucklow, Eli Rosenstein

CHANGES IN WINTER USE

"As the areas with quality snow shrink, more users are being pushed into smaller areas. Search-and-rescue incidents have also increased for winter wilderness users."

— Sam Massman, Acting District Ranger, Dillon District
Sam has observed that changes in backcountry ski gear technology have directly increased winter wilderness visitation. More people are competing for fresh tracks as high-quality powder becomes harder to find. He has also noted that winter access roads — such as the Trapper Lake Road into the Flat Tops Wilderness — are melting out and being plowed earlier in the spring, giving people access to the high country sooner.



Eli Rosenstein digging out a wilderness boundary sign

"Sometimes it seems we are the only spot in Colorado with snow. Winter use has increased because other areas of the state are receiving less and less snowfall."

— Eli Rosenstein, Recreation Operations Manager, Routt NF

Ryan and Dale have observed that winter use along the Colorado Front Range is largely dependent on snow conditions, which are increasingly inconsistent. One of their biggest challenges is knowing what is happening in the wilderness during winter. Summer sports continue through winter months in years with low snowpack, adding management complexity.

ISSUES AND MANAGEMENT ADJUSTMENTS

Across districts, rangers are encountering a common set of challenges as winter conditions evolve:

- Sam Massman changed seasonal scheduling to add more 18/8 and 13/13 permanent seasonals to cover extended shoulder seasons and winter months.
- Eli Rosenstein's team grapples with the difficulty of contacting users and enforcing snowmobile prohibitions in the wilderness. Forest Service employees are not allowed to follow people into the wilderness without Forest Supervisor permission, though an MRDG allows FPOs and LEOs to pursue snowmobiles they visually witness entering the wilderness.
- Eli's district also faces a fleet issue: replacing aging snowmobiles is difficult under current procurement systems, and long-term rentals may become necessary.
- Ryan and Dale deal with road gate violations during low-snow years — including people removing or going around closure gates to access high-country roads before they are officially open.

SKILLS EVERY WINTER RANGER NEEDS

Winter wilderness management requires a distinct set of technical and personal skills beyond the typical summer ranger toolkit:

- Avalanche training: Required across White River NF; rangers must read terrain and make real-time safety decisions.
- Snowmobile proficiency: Eli is direct: "The first step of becoming a proficient snowmobiler is learning how to get unstuck." His approach with new employees: lead for the first few days, then follow until they find their footing.
- Navigation without devices: Cold temperatures drain phone batteries quickly. Rangers need a strong internal sense of direction.



Eli Rosenstein on a wilderness boundary patrol

- Winter driving: Safe travel to and from trailheads, including proper use of chains and four-wheel drive, is a baseline requirement for all winter field staff.
 - Mental resilience: "A positive attitude when the going gets tough is critical," says Eli. Winter conditions deteriorate quickly and rangers must stay sharp under pressure.
- arning how to get unstuck." His approach with new employees: lead for the first few days, then follow until they find their footing.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD

- Adjusting to changing climate conditions of having less snow and less of a winter season. Managing concentrated winter use as snow levels are pushed higher. We probably need to look at changing gate and access points to higher elevations to allow for more access when the roads are dry and snowfree (Sam Massman)
- We need more emphasis on winter wilderness management, we need to realize that the field season is year round now. Work with your neighboring districts and forest to share resources and ideas. (Eli Rosenstein)
- Treat trailhead messaging as the face of the Forest Service. Signs should be current, clear, and information-complete — they are often the only "ranger" a visitor encounters in the winter season. (Ryan Sloan)
- Lean on volunteer and partner networks. In places with limited staff, partners who report conditions are invaluable in winter. (Ryan Sloan)



Wilderness boundary patrol on snowmobile

THANK YOU TO
OUR WINTER
WILDERNESS
PROFESSIONALS
WHO TOOK THE TIME
TO PARTICIPATE!



Wilderness boundary sign



WAG members at the Jeff View Shelter on the Deschutes National Forest January 2026



YOUR 2025-2026 CHIEF'S WAG REPRESENTATIVES

The Chief's Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG) consists of representatives from each Forest Service Region, along with members from the Washington Office, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. The group was established in 1989 for the purpose of providing advice and counsel to the Chief of the Forest Service on matters related to wilderness stewardship from the perspective of field level managers.

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2026 WAG TASK TEAMS



STOCK TASK TEAM

Assembled in November of 2024, the Stock Task Team began with the simple question: what is needed to help keep our USFS stock programs functional and funded. To answer these questions, the task team began by reaching out to stock program managers and pack stations across the agency to solicit concerns and ideas from subject matter experts. These calls became “listening sessions” and as attendance grew, it became evident that one vital need for stock programs was the opportunity to support each other through networking and community.

A Teams Channel was created to connect this group. After pausing for field season, the Task Team hosted a check-in with the community in early January 2026. While specialized skills such as Trails (TAG), Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers management (WAG, WIMST, Team RAPIDS), Chainsaws and Crosscut Saws (SPTAG) each have a technical advisory group of subject matter experts to inform the WO of its needs and concerns – there is no such voice for our stock community. This year, the Stock Task Team is seeking to build upon the foundational work completed in the 2025 WAG session to accomplish two primary objectives.

The first: to use the WAG Brief-the Chief session as an opportunity to introduce the Chief to why our task team has been created, highlighting the critical role of stock in all areas of resource management, and to what it is we hope to build.

Second: the loftier goal of the Stock Task Team is to bring a working group of stock Subject Matter Experts from across the agency together to lay the foundations for a Community of Practice or Technical Advisory Group. This group would function to inform the WO of critical needs for stock programs, and work towards creating opportunities and resources to keep stock programs efficient, safe and adequately funded.

This team of experts has been assembled and has been tasked with gathering information for Brief the Chief. Work will be ongoing.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TASK TEAM

There is a growing opportunity to strengthen structured Communities of Practice to support skill development and knowledge sharing. Improved communication is essential to helping field units keep pace with policy changes, best practices, and interagency expectations.

WAG created **WildTalk**, a web-based community of practice that is being used by field managers and technicians to share knowledge and answer questions pertaining to on-the-ground management for wilderness and wild and scenic rivers. Some examples include:

- Information on MOU's involving unplanned landings of military aircraft in wilderness
- Campground concessionaire along Wild & Scenic River corridors

Wilderness areas continue experiencing increasing visitor pressure, particularly near population centers. At the same time, the wilderness program is experiencing staffing capacity and specialized skill gaps. Permanent wilderness staff numbers are not keeping pace with administrative and field demands.

WAG remains committed to elevating the value of wilderness while providing solutions and realistic assessments from the field. During interim operations, WAG is acting as a conduit of information going to the field, including:

- Disseminating how-to's for wilderness documentation
- Facilitating Wildland Fire Resource Advisors (READs) and the tools available to them
- Ensuring district level Wilderness managers are introduced to regional SMEs and Wilderness POCs on the National Forest units.

WILDERNESS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STEERING TEAM



WIMST members at the Jeff View Shelter on the Deschutes National Forest January 2026

Region 1: Colter Pence, Flathead NF-Hungry Horse RD

Region 2: Andrea Maichak, Bighorn NF

Region 3: Ron Turner, Tonto NF

Region 4: Tim Farris, Bridger-Teton NF-Jackson RD

Region 5: Kelly Muller, Inyo NF

Region 6: Molly Johnson, Deschutes NF

Region 8: Mason Boring, Cherokee NF-Ocoee/Hiwassee RD

Region 9: Stacy Duke, Hoosier NF

Region 10: Karisa Garner, Tongass NF

Academia: Troy Hall, Oregon State University, College of Forest
Ecosystems and Society

WO: Portia Jelinek, Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

WILDERNESS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STEERING TEAM

The Wilderness Information Management Steering Team (WIMST) consists of representatives from each Region, along with members from the Washington Office and academia. The group was established in 1999 for the purpose of promoting quality wilderness stewardship at all levels of the organization through the effective and efficient use of information and data.

During the Fiscal Year 2026 planning meeting in January 2026 on the Deschutes National Forest, the group decided to focus on subject matter around wilderness character monitoring and wilderness messaging. A brief description of the task teams is below and a full list of task team work as well as additional information about WIMST can be found on the National Wilderness Program SharePoint Site.

Wilderness Character Monitoring

The wilderness character monitoring task team is working on reviewing and revising messaging, facilitating resource development and sharing, and continuing to coordinate with the Central Teams and Society for Wilderness Stewardship. This task team provides support for the WCM program during a transitional period.

Wilderness Messaging

The wilderness messaging task team is assisting in developing clear and relevant messaging of Wilderness importance to assist the Wilderness Advisory Group in their annual Brief the Chief meeting. This messaging is also being developed for line officers and external audiences to continue delivering the story of relevance and necessity of Wilderness and management of Wilderness, as it pertains to the agency's priorities.

Additionally, WIMST is supporting the development of a Community of Practice with WAG to support wilderness staff across the agency in answering questions and facilitating wilderness information to the field.





As we look back over the past year, we're excited to share what's been taking shape across our research and partnerships, even as we are struck by the weight of so much change. In 2025, we said goodbye to several of our staff scientists, including our acting director, Dr. Teresa Hollingsworth who passed in the Spring after a long battle with cancer. Ecologist Dr. Kira Hefty joined the Plumas National Forest as a Forest Biologist, while Research Biologist Kathy Zeller joined the Wilderness Society as their Senior Director for Science. In early 2026, we were delighted to welcome Research Economist Travis Warziniack into the role of acting director. Through all this transition, ALWRI continued to conduct cutting-edge research on behalf of America's wildest places.

Here are a couple of highlights from our recent work:

Evaluating a RAD decision-making framework to address climate change in wilderness



Photo: Clark's Nutcracker. Glacier National Park. NPS. 09/2021

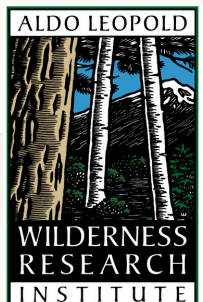
As we wrap up work on this this institute-wide, co-produced project, ALWRI was honored to receive the 2025 US Forest Service Wilderness Award in the category of "Excellence in Research Application". The resist, accept, direct (RAD) framework provides a decision-making space for managers, partners, and researchers to respond to and prepare for future environmental conditions. Through this project, we worked with a selection of wilderness areas administered by Forest Service and DOI land management agencies across the National Wilderness Preservation System. Links to products can be found in our newsletter.

ALWRI documentary film features management challenges and opportunities in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness



The Wild Next Door is a 40-minute documentary film co-produced by ALWRI and the Society for Wilderness Stewardship. The film explores complexities of managing high-use, urban-proximate wilderness, through the case study of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness outside of Seattle, Washington. The film presents many perspectives of wilderness management, including those of current and former US Forest Service managers, Tribal council members, visitors, scientists, and nonprofit partners, and highlights how Tribal leadership and multi-actor collaboration offer opportunities to resolve the most pressing issues facing this beloved landscape.

To learn more about our recent research and products, check out ALWRI's inaugural [quarterly newsletter](#) which you can find on our [website](#).



ARTHUR CARHART

NATIONAL WILDERNESS TRAINING CENTER



FOSTERING INTERAGENCY EXCELLENCE IN WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP

The mission of the Carhart Center is to equip and inspire agency leaders and partners to ensure that America's National Wilderness Preservation System endures for future generations. We do this through training, information, and education.

Staffing Updates:

In summer 2025 longtime Carhart Administrative staff member Holly Metzger left the program for a position outside of federal service. She was a great asset to the Center and will be missed. With the absence of several key staff positions we want to recognize some Forest Service employees that have stepped up to help fill in where needed. Pam Jolly, Katie Knotek (former WAG Chair), Josh Nadas, Mariana Roybal, and Olga Helmy have all played key roles in keeping things going at Carhart.



CARHART STAFF IN THE FIELD IN SUMMER OF 2025. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JAMES SIPPEL (BLM REPRESENTATIVE), MICHELLE REILLY (USFWS REPRESENTATIVE), HOLLY MEZGER (INTERAGENCY ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF), JIMMY GAUDRY (INTERAGENCY DIRECTOR), ROB BURROWS (NPS REPRESENTATIVE)

Other Project Highlights:

Wilderness Basics Curriculum:

Carhart staff continue to partner with National Technology and Development Program on developing the Wilderness Basics Curriculum. See their write up for more information. Thanks to all of the subject matter experts that are stepping up to help with this project. We think it's going to be a great resource for local training once complete.

Wilderness Webinar Series:

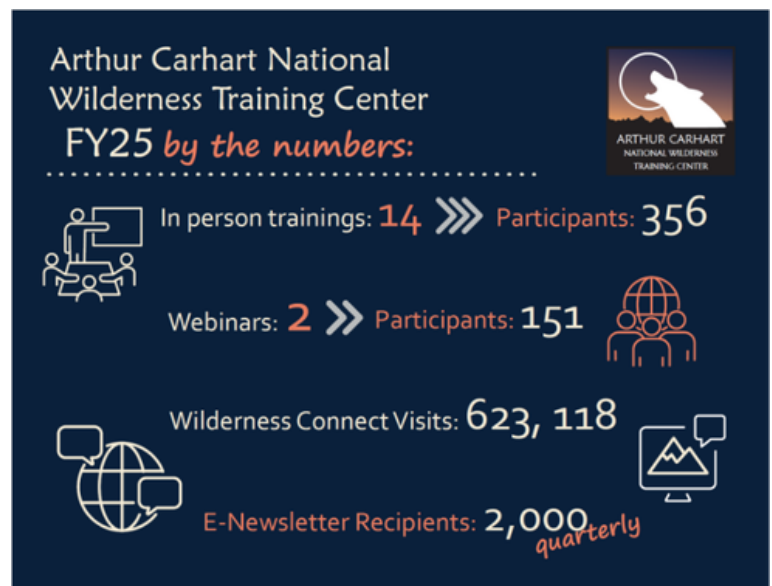
The Minimum Requirements Analysis Basics: What Is it and Why Do It? You can find the recording here:

[Recordings](#)

2026 National and Regional Training Offerings:

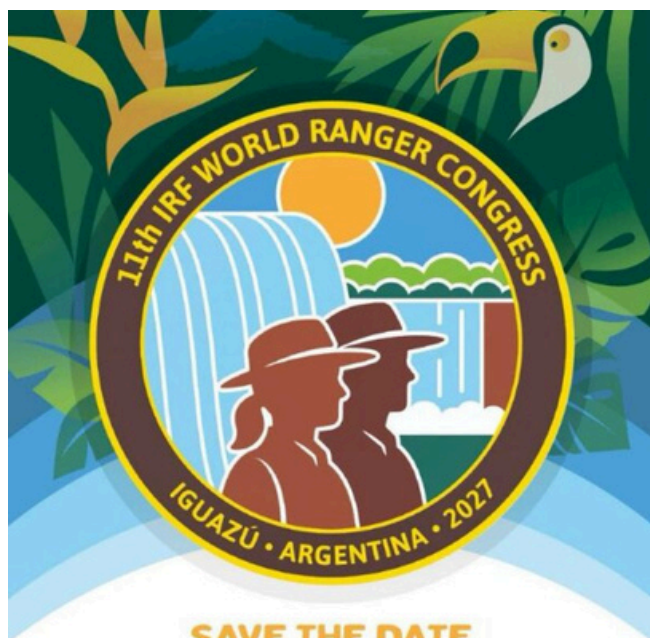
The Carhart Center will host four interagency wilderness trainings in person at various locations across the country this year. Find information on these trainings here: [Classroom-Based Courses](#)

FY25 Carhart by the Numbers:



International Ranger Federation (IRF)

Ranger Associations Strengthening the Ranger Workforce



SAVE THE DATE

APRIL 19-23, 2027

Puerto Iguazú, Argentina



CONTACT: **plan.A** info@plan-aeventos.com

The 2027 IRF World Ranger Congress will be hosted by SIGUNARA and held at Puerto Iguazu in Argentina April 19-23, 2027. The theme **Recognising Rangers - Advancing the Profession to Safeguard Our Future** will highlight the critical role of rangers worldwide in conservation, wildlife protection, and community engagement, and seeks to advance the profession through recognition, training, and support.



2027 IRF World Ranger Congress

The IRF World Ranger Congress brings together rangers from all over the world, giving them the opportunity to learn new skills, share knowledge and create partnerships. It occurs every three years in a different location, allowing host countries from each IRF region to raise the profile of Rangers locally and internationally. It allows them to showcase their successes, to identify how they're addressing their regional challenges and share their knowledge and skills with colleagues from around the world.



Rangers from around the world attend the 2024 World Ranger Congress in France.

For more information about the 2027 IRF World Ranger Congress, visit <https://www.worldrangercongress.org/en/>
For more information about IRF and to take the State of the Ranger Survey, visit <https://www.internationalrangers.org/state-of-the-ranger/>



NATIONAL WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP ALLIANCE

CHANGES AFOOT AT NWSA

Joelle Marier, Executive Director, National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

NWSA has worked in close partnership with the Forest Service since our inception over 15 years ago. We've been proud to serve the agency, wilderness, and public lands throughout this time, from our founding, which was supported by then Director of Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers, Chris Brown, to today where we serve as a primary partner to the Forest Service Wilderness and Trails programs through our administration of funding programs for local stewardship, our ability to connect the agency with local stewardship organizations and volunteers, and through participation in national-level training and planning initiatives.

Since 2016, our strong partnership has been a catalyst for an incredible amount of locally-led wilderness and trails stewardship. Together, we've applied \$4.6M to on-the-ground stewardship projects split almost evenly between the **Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) Program** and the **Trail Stewardship Partners Program**. In the past three years alone, the WSP program has supported 46 wilderness stewardship projects and 31 place-based organizations with \$1.07 million in funding, gaining or maintaining more than 400 in WSP scores and engaging over 2,000 volunteers. In ten years, the WSP Funding Program has benefitted 180 wilderness areas managed by the Forest Service – 40% of areas managed by the agency. Beyond the support provided for wilderness stewardship, partner capacity helped to connect thousands of people to wilderness areas and trails, increased public safety, preserved natural landscapes, and elevated public understanding of the benefits and importance of wilderness. These on-the-ground impacts are a direct result of strong partnerships at every level, from our national partnerships with the agency to the local partnerships between nonprofits and their communities and all of the relationships in between.

We've accomplished great things together and NWSA is working to ensure this work continues. You may have heard the news that NWSA will be downsizing due to a variety of revenue challenges that hit our already slim operating budget hard this year. By the time you read this, I will have moved on from my role as Executive Director and NWSA's Board will be working to plan next steps. We don't yet know what this will mean in the long term, but in the short term NWSA is releasing its staff and shifting focus to the most essential services we provide to the wilderness stewardship community. NWSA will not be hosting the National Wilderness Workshop in 2026 and may be communicating less frequently. We are not standing still amidst this challenge but are instead using this opportunity to reorient and find more sustainable ways to support our partners and ensure robust stewardship for the wild places that need us all now more than ever. If you have questions or concerns about this shift, you can reach out to Jeff Randa, NWSA's Board Chair, at jeff.randa@wildernessalliance.org.

Thank you for standing with us and for all you do to protect and steward America's wildest public lands. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with all of you and am sure the preservation and stewardship of wild places will remain part of my path ahead. I hope to see you on a wild trail sometime soon.

About NWSA

The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance (NWSA) supports a national network of public lands stewardship organizations and builds effective partnerships between community-based non-profit organizations, volunteers, and government agencies to add much needed capacity to caring for America's wilderness and public lands. Visit our [website](#) to learn more.



ABOUT

Wilderness Connect is an interagency communications, education, and science dissemination program that connects people with information about federally designated wilderness areas. Through a collaborative partnership between the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, we support both the stewardship and appreciation of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Our resources serve two primary audiences: the public and wilderness practitioners. Our mission is to: Empower land managers to make informed decisions grounded in law, policy, and the best available science; and Inspire the public to connect with wild places, learn about wilderness areas, and plan responsible visits.

E-COURSES

We're excited to share that the wilderness e-courses are now available for free through the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana.

TOOLBOXES

New this year: Vehicle Intrusions

The Vehicle Intrusions Toolbox addresses the management of land-based motor vehicles, aircraft (including drones and paragliders), snowmobiles, motorboats, and bicycles (including other wheeled conveyances) in designated wilderness.

Recently Updated: Signs Toolbox

The Signs Toolbox provides guidance on signing within wilderness areas, including agency-specific policies, guidelines, sources, and examples.

SEARCH TOOLS

Check out our Wilderness Search Tools hub, a centralized section of the website that brings together key tools for exploring and working with wilderness information. Here, you can access the Advanced Wilderness Search (with filters by state, region, agency, acreage, or designation year), legal tools, summary reports, maps, and a library of images.

STAY CONNECTED!

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Instagram: @wildernessconnect



Sandstone towers in Woodenshoe Canyon

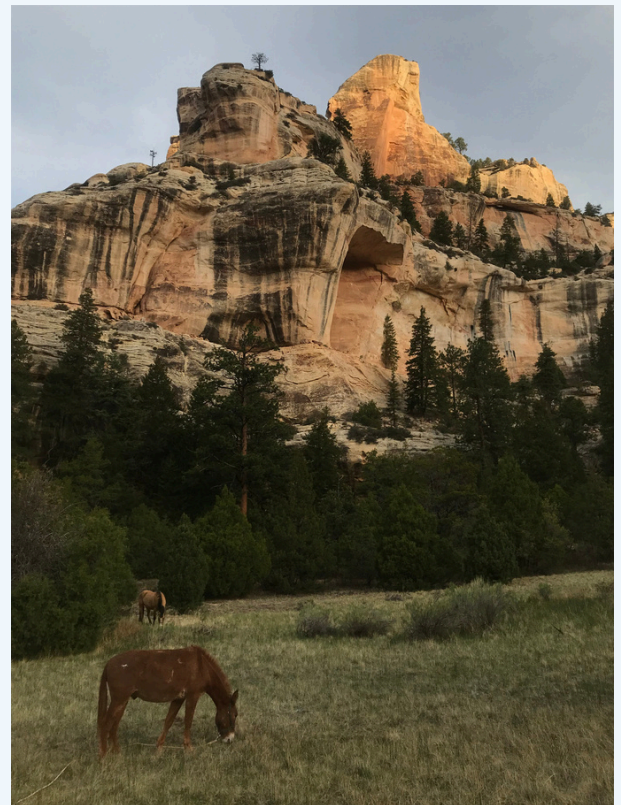


Historic Scorup cabin used by cowboys in the early 1900s

WILDERNESS SPOTLIGHT : DARK CANYON WILDERNESS

Known to some as the “heart of the Colorado Plateau,” Dark Canyon is part of the iconic landscape that constitutes the canyon lands of southeastern Utah. Federally designated as wilderness in 1984 following the passage of the Utah Wilderness Act, this 45,000 acre wilderness represents the first major Colorado Plateau canyon terrain to be added to the national wilderness preservation system. This expansive canyon system, located within the Manti-La Sal National Forest in San Juan County, Utah, is home to a diversity of vegetation types, unique geology and reminders of past cultures that called the canyon home.

The wilderness area is also located within the Bears Ears National Monument that was designated in 2016 to protect the cultural landscape and ancestral homelands of numerous indigenous tribes and pueblos that still live in the region today and have strong ties to the area. The monument and wilderness are co-stewarded by a 5 person Bears Ears Commission with representatives from the Hopi Nation, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah Ouray and the Zuni Tribe.



Forest Service stock grazing in Horse Pasture Canyon after a long day of packing trail supplies



Golden aspens at the Woodenshoe Canyon Trailhead



The wilderness crew camping in Dark Canyon

The wilderness spans a wide variety of vegetation zones including aspen and fir at the upper elevations over 9,000 feet, to old growth Ponderosa and pinyon and juniper forest at lower elevations in the canyon. Cottonwood lined riparian areas are found in canyon bottoms and unique hanging gardens are located along the cliffs and alcoves.



Ancestral Puebloan structure and bighorn pictographs



Wilderness rangers monitoring Ancestral Puebloan structures high on a ledge

One of the unique features of the wilderness are the many remains of past cultures. The archeological record in Dark Canyon spans thousands of years and includes Archaic, Ancestral Puebloan, historic Ute, Navajo and Anglo cultures. Sites in the wilderness include remains of ancient cliff dwellings, large villages, kivas, and ceremonial sites of the Ancestral Puebloan Culture, and well-preserved cabins and buildings associated with historic ranching operations. Monitoring these important cultural features of the wilderness is one of the primary duties for the rangers working in this unique wilderness.



The National Technology and Development Program (NTDP) helps the Forest Service and partners solve practical, on-the-ground problems. For more than 80 years, NTDP has developed tools, training, and technical solutions that support wilderness agencies and other partners in doing their work safely and effectively.

NTDP has created many well-known wilderness and traditional-skills resources, including the Pack Stock Low Impact in the Backcountry film series, Rigging for Trail Work, The Crosscut Saw Manual, The Crosscut Filer, and One Moving Part: The Forest Service Ax Manual. You can take a virtual office tour and explore additional publications, tech tips, and videos on NTDP's product page.

Current Wilderness Projects

Wilderness Stewardship Basics Training

Thomas Sabol, Mo Mislivets, and Becca King are partnering with the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center and subject matter experts from across the wilderness-managing agencies to create updated, multimedia training for new and returning wilderness staff. The training will include eight modules featuring interviews, short films, animations, interactive activities, and instructor materials.

Wilderness Ranger Field Guide

Currently on hold.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED WORK AS STEWARDS OF AMERICA'S ENDURING WILDERNESS RESOURCE!

For more information about Wilderness Stewardship, please visit:

National Wilderness Program SharePoint Site (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/FSWilderness>



Chief's WAG (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/ChiefsWAG>

WIMST (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/WIMST>

ALWRI: <https://leopold.wilderness.net/>

ACNWTC: <https://carhart.wilderness.net/>

National Trails Program (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/FSTrails>