

Opinion: TRTA, USFS partners more important than ever

By Chris Binder

Nonprofit partners of government agencies play a critical role in managing trails, recreation, planning and other essential activities taking place on public lands. Locally, the Tahoe Rim Trail Association is the region's largest nonprofit trail organization and has the primary responsibility for managing and maintaining about 200 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails in and around the Tahoe basin in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Nevada State Parks.

The Tahoe Area Mountain Bike Association, another regional nonprofit, maintains close to 100 additional miles.

With only about 300 total miles of non-motorized trail in the Tahoe basin, these numbers confirm the significance of agency/nonprofit partnerships in managing the recreation resources that are vital to the quality of life and economy of the Tahoe region. While USFS firefighting costs consume a rapidly growing portion of already tight budgets and staff hours, the role of the TRTA and other nonprofit partners in managing resources on National Forest lands has become more important than ever.

As Randy Moore, USFS Pacific Southwest Regional Forester, noted in his **op-ed late last month**, "More fires mean less funds for local Forest Service projects." The Forest Service is the only federal agency required to fund its entire emergency management program through its regular appropriations budget. This means that the more the agency spends on the essential work of fighting large, devastating fires, the less it has to spend on other programs, like maintaining and constructing trails and upgrading recreation

facilities. While the importance of the USFS firefighting program is undeniable, it comes at a great cost to other crucial work the USFS has traditionally accomplished. Moore and countless others both in and out of government have been working to fix this broken budgeting system for years, but so far no solution has been able to pass both houses of Congress. In the meantime, the USFS has its hands tied as more and more of its staff and budget are dedicated to fighting increasingly intense and widespread fires. This leaves fewer people and less money available to maintain and construct trails and other recreation infrastructure or plan for future recreation projects. Such functions are vital on our public lands, particularly in the Tahoe basin where 56,000 permanent residents and 5.7 million annual visitors rely on them.

A 2015 USFS publication titled "The Rising Cost of Fire Operations: Effects on the Forest Service's Non-Fire Work" notes that the loss of staffing and funding for non-fire work on National Forests has a "debilitating impact [on] ... programs and infrastructure that support thousands of recreation jobs and billions of dollars of economic growth." This is particularly true in communities, such as ours, that are dependent on outdoor recreation and pristine public lands. USFS staff dedicated to managing National Forest lands decreased by 39 percent between 1998 and 2015, while fire staffing increased 114 percent over the same time period (the overall number of staff remained largely unchanged at around 23,000). Similarly, the report projected that 67 percent of the national USFS budget would go toward wildland fire programs by 2025, up from just 16 percent in 1995. It's troubling to note that only three fire seasons after the publication of the report that projection has been revised. The USFS now expects to reach the 67 percent benchmark by 2021, with no data to suggest that the cost of firefighting will be curbed any time soon. Between 1998 and 2015 USFS funding (adjusted for inflation) fell 35 percent for inventory and monitoring programs, 64 percent for land management

planning, and 68 percent for capital improvement and maintenance of facilities. USFS money for planning, building and maintaining recreation infrastructure is literally disappearing in a haze of smoke.

A shift of staff and money within a federal agency on a national scale does not necessarily equate to a shift in priorities for local agency staff. Our local USFS personnel recognize the importance of recreation in the Tahoe region. We have dedicated and talented individuals in our local and regional USFS offices who work hard to find creative solutions to managing trails and other recreation facilities that do not rely on dwindling funding from the agency's budget. However, each passing year brings longer absences by agency staff pulled from other duties to fight fires, more key non-fire positions left vacant and unfilled, and a reduction in the agency's ability to produce funding for non-fire projects. In the USFS's "National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System" published late last year, the agency cites a need to shift to "a model of shared stewardship" that embraces "a community driven and locally sustainable trail system model" led by volunteers and nonprofits. Members of the trails community are recognizing that the USFS is increasingly more reliant on local non-profit partners to maintain and expand recreation opportunities than at any time in the past.

The TRTA and the Tahoe region's other nonprofit trail organizations are up the task, and have been expanding to plug the holes left by diminished agency resources. However, now more than ever, local nonprofit groups working on public land need public support to lead the charge. These groups are building, maintaining and improving the valued recreation infrastructure that helps to make the Tahoe region one of the best places to recreate in the country. If you value outdoor recreation on public lands and its effect on our community's quality of life and economy please consider becoming a member of a local trail organization or joining one of the scores of

volunteer events hosted around the lake each year. Our forests and trails need us, now more than ever.

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