

# Breaking new ground

Forest Service turns to private groups to fill in gaps left by dwindling dollars for work on trails

By ERIC BARKER of the Tribune |

Emerald LaFortune spent the summer working on trails in two Idaho wilderness areas, tucking away a few bucks for college and gaining real-world experience.

In years past, the Moscow resident might have been employed by the U.S. Forest Service working with other young people on one of its many trail crews. Instead LaFortune, a senior at the University of Montana, worked for the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation. The nonprofit organization raises and spends private money to maintain public trails in central Idaho wilderness areas.

With federal budgets shrinking and backcountry recreation far from the government's top priority, more and more miles of trails are falling into disrepair. To compensate, the Forest Service is increasingly relying on partnerships with groups like the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation to keep trails open.

The group, using its paid field staff of 10 full-time wilderness rangers and stewards, nine full-time interns like LaFortune and marshaling volunteers from several different organizations, worked on nearly 250 miles of trails last summer along with other projects. It had a budget of \$500,000 and received another \$300,000 in donated labor from volunteers.

By contrast, in 2012 the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest had a trail budget of \$1.5 million. The two forests, covering 4 million acres, have about 5,000 miles of trails and a large percentage of those, perhaps half, are estimated to be behind schedule for routine maintenance. An estimated 400 miles have not seen a trail crew in 10 years and many have fallen into some degree of disrepair.

## **Backlog stats more than 20 years old**

Both locally and nationally, nobody knows just how bad the trail maintenance backlog is. A 1989 audit by the Government Accountability Office, now more than 20 years old, estimated the agency faced a \$200 million maintenance backlog that resulted in the loss of 5,000 miles of trail. Since that time, Forest Service budgets and the agency's workforce have shrunk, recreation demand has grown and wildfires that exacerbate the problem have grown in size and intensity.

The GAO is in the midst of updating its 1989 audit at the request of Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va., and Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo. In the meantime nongovernmental organizations are picking up the slack.

Rob Mason, director of the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation, said partnering with people and groups who care about trails is the most pragmatic solution.

"We have to find a way to maintain trails and stewardship of wilderness areas," he said. "I think that means bringing private resources and dollars to bear to take care of the public good. That is what we are trying to do, create a new avenue to take care of trails in wilderness."

Carol Hennessey, trails program manager for the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, said the agency tries to get crews on about 2,000 of the 5,000-mile trail system each year to perform routine maintenance like trail clearing and erosion control. But the agency doesn't have the budget or the workforce to always reach that target. So it concentrates on making sure the most popular trails are kept open. She estimates 500 to 800 miles of secondary trail on the Clearwater are in dire need of maintenance and as many as 1,200 on the Nez Perce.

"We don't know how many of those miles are absolutely not usable but many of those have not been maintained in over 10 years," she said.

### **Public-private collaboration may be 'new normal'**

The forest has won awards for its ability to extend its trail system's reach by working with volunteer groups and nongovernmental organizations. Until recently Hennessey said work by groups like the Backcountry Horsemen, Montana Conservation Corps, Great Burn Wilderness Study Group and the Selway-Bitterroot Foundation was additive, meaning it was viewed as a bonus to the work accomplished by Forest Service crews and contractors it hires. Now the volunteer work is counted on just to keep pace.

"The last two to three years those partners have been absolutely critical to helping us make that (2,000-mile) target," she said.

She and others say that might be the new normal. The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 gave the Clearwater a shot in the arm and helped it erase some of the trail maintenance backlog. But with the national budget deficit and debt taking center stage in presidential and congressional elections, those kinds of infusions aren't likely to be repeated and the Forest Service, along with other federal agencies, is expected to have to tighten its belt.

"I don't think anybody can imagine there being an increase in funding for this kind of work," Mason said. "There might be injections here or there, like the stimulus, but I don't imagine in the near future we are going to see any increase of funding for the Forest Service."

Trail work involves routine stuff like clearing out fallen trees and more difficult work like cutting back encroaching brush, maintaining drainage and erosion control and major projects like bridge replacement or the construction of retaining walls. Under an emerging strategy, Hennessey said Forest Service crews are concentrating on the big stuff and leaving the less intensive work to the nongovernmental organizations and volunteer groups. However, both

agree volunteers can't do it alone. They need supervision and support and their work needs to be planned and coordinated.

"If you really want to bolster capacity to do work, you really have to have paid staff who know how to do this kind of work and can take people out there week in and week out," Mason said. "A lot of groups can bring people. One of the unique things we bring is the expertise and capacity to lead all of these trips."

### **More boots on the ground needed**

The Backcountry Horsemen of Idaho is a frequent trail partner for the agency. The group uses its love of packing with stock animals to assist the Forest Service with trail projects. But some, like public lands Director Phil Ryan, think the agency is relying too much on their good will and not taking enough responsibility for trails in places like the vast Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area. Wildfires there, some that burned 10, 15, or even 20 years ago, continue to feed dead trees that blow over with each strong storm, blocking trails, sometimes into thick tangles.

"We cannot, as volunteers, do the job of the U.S. Forest Service. We shouldn't be replacement for their trail crews. We should augment their people," Ryan said.

The group passed a resolution asking the agency to develop a plan to deal with the backlog of trail maintenance in the Frank. They also point out the Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980, which calls for the agency to clear all trails in and adjacent to the wilderness area each year.

"They say 'we don't have the money.' Well the law says that is your job, either jump on Congress to get the money or something has to change."

John McCarthy of the Wilderness Society at Boise agrees the government needs to do more to maintain trails. The Idaho branch of the organization helped found the Idaho Trails Association, another group that works with the Forest Service to increase its trail maintenance footprint by organizing and directing volunteer labor. But he also says there is no substitute for agency trail crews like the one he once worked on in the 1970s. Back then and into the 1990s, it was common for each ranger district to have at least one trail crew comprised of five to six people. Since then ranger districts have been combined and trail crews have shrunk in size and number. For example, today there is a single, two- to four-person trail crew for the North Fork Ranger District. But not so long ago the North Fork was divided into the Kelly, Canyon and North Fork districts and they each had at least one crew of five to six people.

"They (volunteers) are going great guns and they are filling a need but I think you can't lose sight of the fact the Forest Service needs to get more people out on the ground," McCarthy said. "We maintain roads and we maintain structures. We need to maintain trails."

### **Skill sets might be lost**

Hennessey fears the agency might be losing some of its capacity for remote trail work. Building and maintaining trails in wilderness areas requires working with primitive tools like crosscut saws, an uncommon skill set. She said it's difficult to recruit people with those skills and it can even be hard to hire contractors.

"We have two really good people on these forests and they are both over 50," Hennessey said. "We don't have anybody coming behind them."

So more and more, backcountry know-how is being shifted to organizations like the Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation and the Montana Conservation Corps where they train people how to use primitive tools. It's a heritage Mason is happy to keep alive.

"We are trying to fill that gap by having professional trail crews who are trained and can bring those skills back year after year," he said.

The foundation is also training the next generation of wilderness leaders in modern methods of working together. For example, LaFortune and the other interns not only learned backcountry skills but also how people and agencies form partnerships to accomplish difficult tasks.

"We weren't fighting the Forest Service, we weren't fighting other interest groups," she said. "I think the (Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation) strives to create bridges among organizations and it felt really good to be part of that, to help the Forest Service and to help the Backcountry Horsemen and to help anyone who values backcountry areas."