Trails and Boardwalks

Yellowstone has 50 miles of frontcountry trails, including 15 miles of boardwalks that are designed to protect both the visitor and the thermal features in the park's most popular geyser basins. The park also maintains at least 950 miles of backcountry trails, many of which evolved from traditional wagon routes, army patrol routes, and dirt roads that had been built for early fire-fighting and other administrative uses. After the fires of 1988, the park decided to eliminate a number of unused or unplanned "social" trails by revegetating these corridors. In 1998, park staff prepared the first long-range plan for trail management.

Walking Through Wonderland

Frontcountry trails and boardwalks. These trails and elevated wooden walkways lead to the park's prime viewpoints. Many of the boardwalks have handrails, and frontcountry trails meet the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) wherever possible. Because they are heavily used, these trails and boardwalks must be well-maintained; immediate repairs are often required to eliminate safety hazards and protect wet soils and other resources. Trails through geothermal areas often cross unstable ground and must be rerouted as thermal features change and new hot spots appear. Proactive maintenance efforts are hampered, however, by a shortage of staff to complete needed trail repairs and boardwalk replacement.

Backcountry trails. With an average of one worker per 50 miles of trail, the park's trail crews struggle to keep backcountry paths free from washouts and debris flows, remove fallen trees, and repair bridges over creeks, rivers, and perennial bogs. Some trails are difficult to follow because of infrequent use, insufficient trail markers, fire impacts, or their location in large meadows where the trail tread is not clear. Annual trail work falls well below accepted standards and demonstrated need.

Backcountry creeks and rivers are crossed by some 600 to 700 bridges. As outlined in the park's *Backcountry Management Plan* (see "Backcountry Use," page 6–

29), staff will evaluate the need for new and replacement bridges in the wilderness. The structures vary from simple split-log designs to two massive suspension bridges built for pack trains to cross the Yellowstone River in the Black Canyon, which have not been adequately inspected for safety, tightened, or repaired in decades. Each year trail crews are able to inspect about half of the bridges and maintain 200 miles of backcountry trails.

Plastic Wood

For many years an alternative has been sought to the untreated wood traditionally used to construct boardwalks. Untreated wood is generally expected to last only about seven years and often must be replaced sooner in park thermal areas due to the extreme temperatures and corrosive soils. In the early 1980s, the park began using a chemically treated wood that lasts an average of 15 years, but its preservatives contain arsenic, copper, and chromate, making disposal hazardous.

In 1994, Yellowstone began testing a lumber made of recycled plastic that was donated by Unilever Home & Personal Care, USA, as part of its "Recycling at Work" national parks program. With Unilever paying half of the decking cost, this plastic lumber was used to replace the park's largest viewing platform—a 30,000 square foot area in front of Old Faithful Geyser. Although the plastic lumber is more expensive than wood, it is more cost-effective because it is expected to last at least 30 years. In addition, it does not leach chemicals, conveys an important conservation message to visitors, and has prompted inquiries from local schools and businesses.

Program Needs

• Preventive maintenance . The frontcountry trails backlog is increasing steadily due to budget constraints. Backcountry trails are less expensive because they are less developed and receive less traffic, but on 750 miles of trail, drainage and erosion control devices are inadequate to preserve trail tread. At least 100 miles of trail have excessively steep grades or traverse wetlands and other sensitive resources; extensive reroutes are needed to protect natural features and archeological sites.

• Accessibility. In cooperation with interested advocacy groups, park staff need to continue to inventory trail accessibility factors, including steepness, terrain, elevation gain, and impediments such as stream crossings and narrow bridges. Although the park cannot meet UFAS requirements on most backcountry trails, this information can be used to assist visitors in choosing a trail based on their abilities, and to improve access by removing some impediments.

Trails and Boardwalks

Stewardship Goals

All trails are constructed and maintained to the highest standard appropriate for the setting, while minimizing adverse impact to resources and visitor experiences.

Visitors are offered a variety of safe, high-quality experiences on boardwalks and frontcountry and backcountry trails.

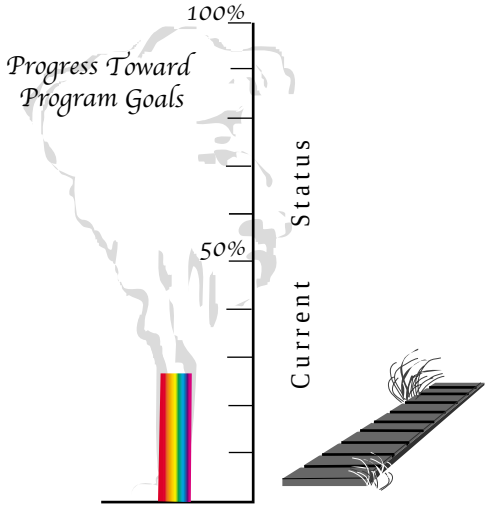
In keeping with wilderness management objectives, the park promotes universal accessibility on backcountry and front-country trails and walkways.

Current State of Resources/Programs

Existing trails are cleared and maintained as time and staff allow, with priority given to the most commonly used trails; neglect results in extensive damage from erosion and creation of social trails. Haste to keep up with urgent safety and resource problems conflicts with overall backcountry and "minimum tool" objectives.

The lack of a cyclic trails maintenance program hampers safety, visitor-use management, and resource protection objectives in both back-country and frontcountry areas.

Some recent improvements in accessibility of boardwalks and backcountry campsites have been made, but the park lacks a significant program to improve accessibility in front-country or wilderness zones.



1998 Funding and Staff

Recurring Funds	
Yellowstone N.P. Base Budget	$ 221,500
Non Recurring Funds	
One-time Projects	$ 180,000
Fee Demonstration Program	$ 251,000
Staff	13.22 FTE

The human resources and funding necessary to professionally and effectively manage the park to stewardship levels will be identified in the park business plan.