



Testimony

*For Release
on Delivery
Expected at
1:30 p.m. EST
Tuesday
February 26, 1991*

Changes Needed in the Forest
Service's Recreation Program

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks and
Public Lands
Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs
House of Representatives



050700 / 143 070

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's work on the Forest Service's recreation program in general and, in particular, the condition of its developed recreational sites. In addition, I will discuss our forthcoming report which will highlight the principal concerns we raised in four reports over the past 16 months on the Forest Service's recreation program.¹

SUMMARY

In summary, despite increases in appropriations during the latter part of the 1980s, the Forest Service's funding and staffing have not been sufficient to either develop recreational sites and areas up to the levels called for in national forest plans or to maintain them at the Service's current standards. We estimated that at least \$644 million is needed to eliminate the maintenance and reconstruction backlog--\$449 million for developed sites and \$195 million for trails. Additionally, millions more are needed to develop special recreation areas to their planned levels and to maintain both them and wilderness areas at current standards. The Service also has not developed uniform, consistent national data on the maintenance and reconstruction needs of these holdings. The maintenance and reconstruction backlog has resulted in health and safety hazards and unrepaired site damage that could result in the loss of recreational sites and areas.

¹See Parks and Recreation: Maintenance and Reconstruction Backlog on National Forest Trails (GAO/RCED-89-182, Sept. 22, 1989), Wilderness Preservation: Problems in Some National Forests Should be Addressed (GAO/RCED-89-202, Sept. 26, 1989), National Forests: Special Recreation Areas Not Meeting Established Objectives (GAO/RCED-90-27, Feb. 5, 1990), and Parks and Recreation: Resource Limitations Affect Condition of Forest Service Recreation Sites (GAO/RCED-91-48, Jan. 15, 1991).

The Service needs to develop a strategy to address the long standing problems with its recreation program. Maintaining the status quo is not acceptable because it will only result in further degradation and loss of recreational sites and areas. When developing such a strategy, the Service needs to consider three variables: funding levels, the number of sites and areas to be developed and maintained, and the extent to which development and maintenance standards can or should be revised.

BACKGROUND

The 191 million acres of land administered by the Forest Service provide more recreational opportunities and record more visitor use--about a quarter of a billion visitor days per year--than any other federal lands. The trail system is the largest in the nation, with more than 108,000 miles of trail on which to hike, horseback ride, or cross-country ski. Forest Service lands also contain about 32.5 million acres of congressionally-designated wilderness; 28 special recreation areas that offer unique or outstanding geologic, scenic, or botanic features; and nearly 13,000 developed sites, including more than 4,400 campgrounds and 1,400 picnic grounds.

RESOURCES NOT SUFFICIENT TO MAINTAIN AND RECONSTRUCT SITES AND AREAS

Through much of the 1980s, the Forest Service could not maintain its recreational sites and areas in accordance with its established maintenance standards. Despite increases in appropriations over the past 5 years, funds have not been sufficient to maintain sites and areas to standards. Without sufficient resources, much routine but necessary maintenance work such as mending campfire pits, painting restrooms, and replacing broken or rotted parking barriers had to be deferred. This has resulted in a deterioration of Service sites and a growing backlog

of unmet maintenance and reconstruction needs. Our January 15, 1991, report on the condition of developed recreational sites highlighted the need for more financial resources. We estimated that as of September 30, 1989, for developed recreational sites alone, a \$449 million backlog of unmet maintenance and reconstruction needs existed--more than double the amount the Forest Service reported to the Congress in 1986.

Contributing to this backlog were aging sites, increased use, and public demand for new or modernized facilities. We estimate that about half of the 13,000 sites were between 20 and 40 years old and that an additional 27 percent, or 3,500, were more than 40 years old. Older facilities deteriorate faster and are more difficult to repair. Recreation use of the national forests is also increasing. According to Forest Service data, visitor days increased from an estimated 184 million in 1972 to over 250 million in 1989. Such increased use also accelerates wear and tear requiring more frequent maintenance and repair of these sites. Demand for modern facilities and amenities has also added to the maintenance and reconstruction backlog. Many visitors to the forests are now calling for more modern amenities such as electrical hookups and hot showers. In addition, Forest Service policy also requires that facilities be renovated to meet the needs of people with disabilities such as making paths and trails accessible to people in wheelchairs and providing interpretative services for the deaf and blind.

Our report also noted that very little of the Service's recreation budget is available to address the backlog. For example, total funds appropriated in fiscal year 1989 for the Service's developed recreation program amounted to about \$136 million. Of that amount, about \$112 million was for operations, maintenance, and administration; however, only about \$43 million was spent at the district level, where the day-to-day operations occur. The remainder was used for program expenses at the forest

FOREST SERVICE HAS NOT DEVELOPED
UNIFORM, CONSISTENT NATIONAL DATA

Despite the growing backlog of deferred maintenance and reconstruction needs, the Forest Service has not developed systems to gather uniform and consistent national data on the condition of its recreational sites and areas. Our January 15, 1991, report pointed out that the Forest Service does not have a reliable system to monitor or report to the Congress on the nationwide condition and maintenance needs of its developed recreational sites. A system to gather recreational site condition information was discontinued in 1986 because it was considered outmoded, a burden, and unresponsive to field offices' management information needs.

Since then, the Service has been developing a new system. In the interim, field offices have used various methods to maintain inventories of site conditions and track their backlog needs. Accordingly, the extent to which such information exists and is documented varies widely. Some districts have continued to prepare and maintain extensive data on their maintenance and reconstruction needs; others have relied on informal handwritten notes and memory. Consequently, neither the Service nor the Congress has the information needed to make informed budgetary decisions concerning the Service's recreation program.

The Service is nearing completion of a new information system which will gather data on the maintenance and reconstruction needs of its recreational sites. However, as pointed out in our January 15, 1991, report, the reliability of the data to be gathered by the new system is questionable since the Service's regional offices are not required to collect basic site condition information from their district offices, which have the most accurate data. The system, as planned, also will not contain any measure of backlog severity, such as how much of the backlog is related to health and safety hazards and site damage. We made recommendations to address these

supervisor, regional, and headquarters offices, primarily for salaries and administrative costs.

The deferral of needed maintenance work has resulted in health and safety hazards and unrepaired site damage. During our visits to recreational sites in 10 forests, we observed numerous health and safety hazards such as untrimmed tree limbs, leaking toilets, cracked and crumbling fire pits, broken picnic tables and benches, and cracked and disintegrating boat ramps. We also observed damage at camp and picnic grounds such as exposed tree roots and eroded paths.

While not posing an immediate threat to humans or the environment, damage from vandalism, if not corrected, could also degrade the public's recreational experience. We saw numerous examples of buildings that had been spray painted with graffiti, defaced picnic tables, and damaged or destroyed information boards and signs.

OTHER UNMET RESOURCE NEEDS

The Forest Service has also not had sufficient resources to develop, maintain, and/or repair its trails and special recreation and wilderness areas. In our September 22, 1989, report on the condition of Forest Service trails, we estimated that as of September 30, 1988, \$195 million was needed to bring the trails up to standards. Such standards include maintaining trails free of obstruction and erosion. Our September 26, 1989, and February 5, 1990, reports focused on wilderness preservation and special recreation areas, respectively. In them, we stated that millions more were needed to bring the Forest Service's special recreation areas up to their planned levels of development, such as building visitor information centers, and to maintain special recreation and wilderness areas at current standards.

shortcomings; however, the Service has not yet commented on what actions it will take.

We made similar recommendations on information needs in our reports on trails, special recreation areas, and wilderness areas. In response to those recommendations, the Service has taken or is planning to take a number of actions to gather more uniform and consistent national data. If these recommendations, as well as those in our January 15, 1991, report are fully implemented, both the Service and the Congress will have a more reliable nationwide picture of recreational site and area conditions, the severity of the conditions, and the resources needed to bring sites and areas up to standards.

DIFFICULT DECISIONS CONCERNING THE
FUTURE OF THE RECREATION PROGRAM

With uniform, consistent national data, the Service will be in a better position to develop a strategy to guide the future direction of its recreation program. In developing such a strategy, the Service needs to consider three variables: funding levels, the number of sites and areas to be developed and maintained, and the extent to which development and maintenance standards can or should be revised.

For example, the Service may wish to maintain its existing standards. This would require either increasing funding and/or limiting the number of sites and areas to be developed and maintained. Funding could be increased through appropriations. This may be difficult, however, in this era of fiscal constraints and competing demands. Higher or additional user fees could be imposed. While higher fees could be imposed administratively, imposing additional user fees would require legislative changes. Increasing the use of cost-sharing programs such as partnerships with civic or nonprofit organizations and volunteers are other

alternatives to increased funding. However, the funds raised through cost-sharing programs have so far been insignificant compared to the resources needed, and the use of volunteers requires a considerable Service investment of time and money, with no assurance that volunteers will remain committed and available.

In lieu of funding increases, the current standards could still be met if the number of sites and areas requiring maintenance or development were reduced. Some sites and areas could be permanently closed--an action which could further strain remaining sites and areas because of increased use--or construction of new sites and areas could be deferred or cancelled. But both would necessitate difficult choices.

The Service could also decide to lower its development and maintenance standards to more closely match the resources available. This would also be difficult in that it could result in providing the public with a lower quality recreational experience.

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In summary, we believe a change in the Service's recreation program is needed. Maintaining the status quo will result in further degradation of sites and areas, continued health and safety hazards, and the loss of sites and areas. In our opinion, the Service needs to develop a strategy to guide the future direction of its recreation program.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.