

U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region



Sunrise over Thunder Basin National Grassland

Introduction

Forests are Earth's most widespread land-based ecosystem, playing many roles in providing for mankind's economic and environmental well-being. Grasslands are also critical for aesthetic values and economic use. Retaining and increasing the integrity of our nation's ecosystems calls for responsible management of these precious resources.

Established in the conservation movement's infancy, the U.S. Forest Service has a long tradition of professional land management. Career land managers have led the agency since its inception in the early 1900s. In 1905, management responsibility for what was then called the forest reserves was transferred to the Bureau of Forestry in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The bureau was renamed the Forest Service, and two years later the forest reserves became national forests. Since then, the Forest Service mission has evolved in response to changing public needs and expectations, research and technological advances, and new legislative mandates, but the professional land stewardship commitment is ongoing.

As part of the National Forest System, the Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2) enjoys a proud heritage. Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest and Colorado's White River National Forest are among the first national forests Congress proclaimed, carved from the original forest reserves. The Region, headquartered in Golden, Colorado, comprises 17 national forests and 7 national grasslands combined into 11 units in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

Each of the nine geographic and administrative regions of the Forest Service possesses certain characteristics tied to the natural resources, history, and culture it encompasses. These characteristics form a niche, a particular set of values and opportunities distinctive to a region. Three overarching themes collectively form the Rocky Mountain Region's niche: Forest and Grassland Health, Recreation, and Water. The Region has formally identified them as emphasis areas on which to focus strategic long-term efforts to preserve their special values.

Forest and Grassland Health

Forest and grassland health is the barometer of successful management throughout the Rocky Mountain Region. The capacity of forests and grasslands to maintain their health, productivity, diversity, and overall integrity is the scale by which the barometer is read.

Every national forest in the Region is currently experiencing extraordinary insect activity in pine or fir forest types. Recent wind events and prolonged drought have provided an open door for infestation.

Aspen tree mortality is an increasing region-wide forest health concern, focused primarily in western Colorado. Several native insects and diseases have contributed to the mortality following extended drought from 2000 to 2005. Ongoing monitoring and research studies are the best tools for assessing aspen problems.

The Region manages one of the largest Forest Service range programs. Drought conditions, invasive species, grazing, and recreation influence rangeland health conditions. Potential climate change may alter rainfall patterns, species composition, and primary production, which could adversely affect the livestock industry. Elected officials demonstrate elevated interest in grassland issues, including recreational shooting, wildlife species, oil and gas activity, and grazing allotments.

Recreation

Use of the Region's premier landscapes for outdoor recreation is expected to rapidly increase as the Intermountain West population almost doubles over the next decade. Region 2 national forests collectively host about 31.4 million visits annually. Three of the nation's most frequently visited national forests are in Colorado.

While a handful of activities—including wildlife and scenery viewing, hiking, driving for pleasure, or simply visiting the forest to relax—are the most prevalent, the recreation opportunities enjoyed in the Rocky Mountain Region are as diverse as anywhere in the nation.

Water

Most of the water in the Inland West, critical to the social and economic well-being of residents and to forest ecosystems, falls as precipitation on National Forest System lands. Mountain snows supply 75 percent of the Inland West's water; 40 percent of the water in the West falls as precipitation on the highest-elevation lands. A significant percentage of those lands are national forest lands.

The Rocky Mountain Region's 11 forests supply over half of Wyoming's water yield, more than two-thirds of Colorado's water yield, and over 70 percent of the water used in Colorado's public water systems. These forests are the headwaters of seven major river systems in the western United States. Much of the water people enjoy and use far downstream on rivers like the Platte, the Rio Grande, the Arkansas, and the Colorado originates on national forests in the Rocky Mountain Region.

The quality of the West's water supply largely depends on the health of forest and their streams, wetlands, meadows, and riparian areas. Healthy forests and watersheds function as natural sponges that absorb, store, filter, and then slowly release precipitation.

The cumulative effect of a warming climate coincidental with dramatic increases in population growth in most of the western states is increasingly straining western water supplies. Colorado is an example: its population is projected to grow from its current five million to eight million people by 2050.

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