

UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE BRIEFING
BEFORE THE
WYOMING SELECT FEDERAL NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

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Western Wyoming College – Rock Springs, Wyoming

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE-FOREST SERVICE
INTERMOUNTAIN REGION
DEBORAH OAKESON, DEPUTY REGIONAL FORESTER
National Forests in Wyoming

Chairman Boner (Brian Boner), Chairman Heiner (Scott Heiner) and Members of the Committee:

Good morning, I am Deborah Oakeson, Deputy Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region of the USDA Forest Service. I am here on behalf of our Regional Forester, Mary Farnsworth. Thank you to Chairman (Senator Brian) Boner & Chairman (Representative Scott) Heiner and the entire Committee for the opportunity to come before the Wyoming Select Federal Natural Resources Management Committee to speak to you today.

Thank you.

The United States Forest Service in Wyoming

The United States Forest Service manages eight (8) National Forests within the state boundaries of Wyoming – split across two our Regions: the Rocky Mountain Region headquartered in Lakewood, Colorado and the Intermountain Region out of Odgen, Utah (where I work).

In order to answer the Committee’s questions focused on Western Wyoming, I will concentrate my remarks on Region 4, the Intermountain Region.

In Wyoming, the Intermountain Region includes all or portions of four national forests in western Wyoming: the Bridger-Teton, Caribou-Targhee, Ashley, and Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forests.

The United States Forest Service Wildfire Crisis Strategy in Wyoming

One of the key mandates to the Forest Service is the restoration of healthy, resilient landscapes by reducing wildfire risk to protect communities and lives, improving forest and grassland conditions, and delivering values, products, and services to the public.

We manage these forests for multiple uses ranging from forest health, water, and wildlife management, to protecting cultural and heritage resources and sites, livestock grazing, extracting minerals, outdoor recreation, and timber production.

In Wyoming, we administer 418 grazing permits, 4 ski area permits, and 235 outfitter and guide operations. The estimated annual visitation to Western Wyoming forests is over 2.2 million, and the vast majority of those visiting the Bridger-Teton National Forest and the Ashley National Forest's Flaming Gorge Ranger District.

In 2022, the Forest Service issued its Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This crisis calls for decisive action. The strategy aims to reduce severity of wildfires, protect communities, and improve the health and resiliency of fire-adapted forests.

Through large landscape work over the next decade, this strategy puts the right work, in the right place, at the right scale. It matches the response with the size and severity of the problem. The strategy brings together Tribes, partners, States, and communities to work across all boundaries. Under the wildfire crisis strategy (WCS), the Forest Service expects to reduce wildfire exposure in areas at highest risk by collaborating with partners.

The goal of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy is to reduce wildfire risk in high-risk firesheds. Three of the 250 high-risk firesheds in the American west are located all or partially within Wyoming. This allows the **Bridger-Teton**, Black Hills, and Shoshone National Forests to utilize streamlined NEPA authorities to address wildfire risk within these firesheds, and BIL authorities authorized by Secretary Vilsack in January of 2023.

Here in the West, our **Intermountain Region** is focused on reduction of hazardous fuels across our forests. Our planned hazardous fuels investments in Wyoming in FY 23 include:

Nearly \$1 million dollars (\$980,000) in carry-over funding for the Bridger-Teton National Forest (the largest contiguous National Forest completely within the Cowboy State).

County collaboratives work closely with the Forest on all timber and fuels projects and include representatives from 13-17 different groups (e.g., federal and state agencies, county agencies, private individuals, NGOs, forest user groups and conservation groups).

The Forest, in coordination with county collaboratives, recently finalized a 10-year Vegetation Management Plan that is aligned with the 10-year WCS. This plan could be expedited with additional funding.

We acknowledge the need for fuels and forest health treatments and continue to explore opportunities to get more work accomplished.

Critical work continues **outside** of the 21 Wildfire Crisis Landscapes.

Shared Stewardship connects the Forest Service with local groups, state and local governments, and non-profit organizations to accomplish vegetation management projects together, resulting in resilient landscapes. Together with the Governor's staff, the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain and Intermountain Regions, and USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service we are working to identify resource management priorities where there is immediate opportunity to implement the Wyoming Agreement.

The first round of funding under the **Community Wildfire Defense Grant** program has been announced. This will be accomplished through contract activities designed to reduce fuel loads and restore forest health.

This program, authorized by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, prioritizes at-risk communities in areas identified as having high or very high wildfire hazard potential, are low-income, or have been impacted by a severe disaster that affects the risk of wildfire.

The program provides funding to communities for two primary purposes:

- To develop or revise Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP).
- To implement projects described in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that is less than ten years old.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) definitions¹ are being used for allocations. The situation in many counties in Wyoming may have changed and I encourage you to reevaluate and update your community wildfire protection plans ensure that representative data is being used.

This past week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a nation-wide investment to expand innovative uses of wood, including as a construction material in commercial buildings, as an energy source, and in manufacturing and processing input for wood products used in framing homes, making paper products and more.

In Wyoming, we are receiving nearly \$500,000 through [Community Wood Grants and Wood Innovations Grants](#) - longstanding Forest Service grant programs that promote innovation in wood products and renewable wood energy economies.

These include \$190,000 in fuel reduction grants in Mountain View and Thane, Wyoming. An additional \$300,000 in grant money will support mill upgrades in Hulett, Wyoming (Northeast Wyoming).

Of particular interest to Senator Ellis, these Community Wood Grants have proven effective for underserved populations within our Region.

Our Tribal Relations program is developing across all our Forests and could provide additional opportunities for cooperation and engagement, ranging from needed winter heating sources and spring fuels reduction, to forest resiliency and restoration of traditionally significant plants impacted by climate change and site disturbances. We think that this and other programs may be of interest to your Select Committee on Tribal Relations.

Other Region 4 economic development opportunities in planning here in Western Wyoming include the Buckboard Marina Expansion proposal on the Ashley National Forest and the construction of the Crow Creek Pipeline through the Caribou-Targhee National Forest.

¹ The wildland urban interface (WUI) is the zone of transition between unoccupied land and human development. It is the line, area or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.

Off-Road Vehicle Trails on United States Forest Service Lands In Wyoming

The recently passed House Bill 42 should have little to no impact on Forest Service trail systems, as we currently require all off-road vehicle operators to follow state law. The USFS concurs with the safety features for motorcycles and off-road vehicles mandated by Senate File 17 – we do not see a negative impact from either act.

Regarding Off Road Trails, there are more than **63** designated off-road vehicle trails encompassing **190.48** miles on USFS lands in Western Wyoming.

The Intermountain Region has another **1390 individual roads** that are designated for OHV/ATV/Motorcycles/E-bike use for a total of **1964 miles**.

The Rocky Mountain Region has some **1380** miles of motorized trails (open to OHVs) in the R2 forests (Big Horn, Medicine Bow and Shoshone) of Wyoming.

Within the **Intermountain Region (R4)**:

Starting in the **Evanston** area, the **Uinta-Wasatch-Cache is represented by the Evanston-Mountain View Ranger District**. This District manages **37,000 acres** in southwestern Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **74 individual roads** and **off-road motorized vehicle trails** for a total of **55.98 miles**. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023MtViewEvanston \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/2023MtViewEvanston) – [a copy is presented in your packet](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

At **3.4 million acres**, the **Bridger-Teton National Forest** is the **largest contiguous Forest completely within Wyoming**. It is adjacent to both Grand-Teton National Park and the National Elk Refuge. The Bridger-Teton has three nationally dedicated wilderness areas, which include the Bridger Wilderness, the Gros Ventre Wilderness and the Teton Wilderness. Its pristine watersheds, abundant wildlife and immense wildlands, the BTNF comprises a large part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the largest intact ecosystem in the lower 48 United States.

The **Greys River Ranger District**, located in **Afton, WY**, manages **438,883 acres** in western Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **241** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **325.46 miles**. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

The **Jackson Ranger District**, of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, manages 695,000 acres in northwestern Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **213** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **244.51** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently plans to open additional 15 miles of off-road motorized vehicle trails.

The **Kemmerer** Ranger District manages 280,500 acres in southwestern Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **119** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trail for a total of **236.2** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

Other B-T Ranger Districts not mentioned by the Committee:

The **Big Piney Ranger District** covers some 400,000-acres in Sublette County, Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **154** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **298.4** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

The **Black Rock Ranger District** in Moran, Wyoming is responsible for the 165,000-acre Blackrock District, in addition to the 584,000-acre Teton Wilderness area in Teton County. Within the management area, there are **108** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **111.2** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

The **Pinedale Ranger District** manages 400,000 acres, as well as the 430,000 acres in the Bridger Wilderness, all within southwestern Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **376** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **518.1** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [2023BTNFmaps&publications](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

The **Flaming Gorge Ranger District**, of the **Ashley National Forest**, manages 96,149 acres in southwestern Wyoming. Within the management area, there are **244** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **220** miles. Additional information, including motorized vehicle use maps, can be found at [FlamingGorgeMVUM2022 \(usda.gov\)](#). There are currently **no** plans to open additional off-road motorized vehicle trails.

On the **Caribou-Targhee National Forest**, the vast majority of forest lands reside within the State of Idaho. However, several Ranger Districts do have trails and roads within Wyoming:

The **Ashton/Island Park Ranger District** has appx 81,518 acres in Wyoming, squeezed between the Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Within the management area, there is **21** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trail for a total of **44.0** miles.

The **Palisades Ranger District** in Idaho Falls covers parts of Northwestern Wyoming near Alpine, over 56,809 acres in total. Within the management area, there are **13** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **25.7** miles.

The **Soda Springs Ranger District** encompasses some 7,305 acres of Wyoming in the Star Valley area, between Auburn to the south and Thayne to the north. Within the management area, there are **five (5)** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **11.8** miles.

The **Teton Basin Ranger District** in Driggs, ID – covers 160,414 acres of Wyoming lands west of Grand Teton National Park. Within the management area, there are **29** individual roads and off-road motorized vehicle trails for a total of **63.2** miles.

The **Montpelier Ranger District** includes **eight (8) acres** within the State of Wyoming as well. There are **no** off-road trails within these eight acres.

While **only the Jackson Ranger District** of the Bridger-Teton National Forest plans to **open 15 miles of additional** off-road motorized vehicle trails. Ongoing plan revision process with the Ashley National Forest, and upcoming Forest Plan Revisions for the Bridger-Teton, Black Hills and Medicine Bow National Forests, all offer opportunities for public and partner engagement on future off-road vehicle trails. Our regional Office Recreation staff can also be of assistance should you have proposals for addition off-road trails.

United States Forest Service Rights-of-Way Permitting

Now I would like to speak a bit on how the United States Forest Service prepares, reviews, issues (and re-issues if necessary) it's Special Use Permit Process.

The process for submitting a request for a right of way across National Forest System lands (NFS) is identified in Forest Service regulations 36 CFR 251 Subpart B Special Uses. It's the same process across the agency. The process is initiated by contacting the Forest Service office where the proposed use is being requested early in the process.

For example, if an entity or person wishes to build a power line on USFS lands, it is a multi-step process mandated by law.

- **The first step is to contact the Forest Service.** This typically occurs at the District Ranger office where the powerline is proposed to be built. One fills out a Standard Form 299 (also known as an SF 299) and schedule a pre-application meeting to discuss the proposal, identify any potential conflicts with the Forest Plan, review timelines, fees and environmental compliance requirements up front.
- **In the SF-299**, the proponent should provide evidence of good standing with Wyoming laws, technical and financial capability, and identify benefits to the public from the proposed project.
- There should be a detailed project description, with location(s), maps and GIS shape files, land and right of way requirement such as width/length, voltage and structure type, construction methods, schedule and environmental protection measures to be taken.
- A **preliminary plan of development (PPOD)** is developed early in the process to aid the proponent in providing information in all phases of the project including construction, operation, maintenance, and decommissioning and is updated throughout the environmental process.
- The **application** to use National Forest **is screened** against Forest Service regulations in 36 CFR 251.54(e)(1)(i)-(ix). If the proposal passes the initial screening criteria, it is reviewed against secondary screening criteria.
- **If the proposal passes initial and secondary screening**, the **application is accepted**. Cost recovery is estimated to process the application based on the level of environmental analysis required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and in compliance with other laws such as the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA).

- An **interdisciplinary team** of Forest Service resource specialists with assistance from a 3rd party environmental contractor (**funded by proponent**), **complete resource surveys/reports to support the environmental analysis**. The **NEPA process is followed** including public involvement, coordination with other agencies (those having jurisdiction or special expertise), document published for public review.
- Following a decision, a **Special Use authorization** (permit or easement) **may be issued for a powerline right of way for up to 30 years** under the authority of the Federal Land Policy and Policy Act (FLPMA). A powerline authorization is required to have an operating plan consistent with Section 512 of FLPMA.
- The **powerline is constructed** (the permit holder usually puts out a request for proposals to construct the line), the Forest Service and holder monitors construction in compliance with the terms and conditions of the authorization and the decision document. This includes implementing biological and cultural resources protection measures, mitigation, revegetating areas of disturbance, treating noxious/invasive weeds, implementing fire precaution measures, ect. Monitoring may continue for a few years after construction related to revegetation success, road reclamation, treating noxious/invasive plants.
- The **permit is administered by the Forest Service Lands Special Uses staff** for compliance with the terms and conditions of the authorization. Annual meetings are held with the owner/operator of the powerline, continued communication about required maintenance of the facility is presented and reviewed/approved the Forest Service.

At the end of the term of the authorization, the permit holder may request the permit be reissued by submitting an SF-299, or determines the powerline is no longer needed and submits a plan to decommission the line.

Conclusion

This concludes my prepared remarks. I want to thank you, again, for the opportunity I've had to talk with you today and I look forward to continuing a positive and productive working relationships with the state of Wyoming. We strive for healthy, diverse, and resilient work forest that provides current and future benefits to the people of Wyoming and the United States. There is no shortage of work that needs to be done and we look forward to working together. I welcome any questions.