



Testimony of Chris Wood of Trout Unlimited on the Legacy Roads and Trails Act, H.R. 2816

House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands,

Tuesday, July 13, 2021

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 2816, the Legacy Roads and Trails (LRT) Act. My name is Chris Wood. I am the President and CEO of Trout Unlimited (TU). On behalf of TU and our 350,000 members and supporters nationwide, I am here to express our support for this legislation.

H.R. 2816, a bipartisan bill led by Representative Schrier, would reinstate the LRT program, which from 2008 to 2018, served a significant role for United States Forest Service road maintenance work and aquatic habitat connectivity on rivers and streams in our National Forests. LRT is a proven and effective conservation program with an extensive list of success stories for fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, and flood resilience.

Codifying and funding the Legacy Roads and Trails program will allow the Forest Service to carry out much-needed maintenance, rehabilitation of poorly maintained roads, and associated activities on the Forest System's roads, trails, and bridges. Critically, the bill focuses on reconnecting habitat for fish and other aquatic species by removing or replacing unnatural barriers, such as faulty culverts, while prioritizing the protection and restoration of threatened fish and wildlife habitat. These projects have the crucial added benefit of fortifying flood resilience and local water supplies, while fostering the growing outdoor recreation economy.

For ten years, until it was consolidated into the Forest Service's general road maintenance program, LRT played a necessary and complementary role in the Service's task of managing its massive network of public lands and waters. The program emphasized areas where Forest Service roads were potentially contributing to water quality problems in streams and water bodies that support threatened, endangered, and sensitive species or community sources. LRT dollars represent opportunities for organizations such as Trout Unlimited to partner with the Forest Service to improve fish and wildlife habitat and protect drinking water supplies.

In 2018, the LRT program was removed as a specific line item and placed into the Forest Service Capital Improvement and Maintenance general fund. This unfortunate move ended a remarkably effective program with demonstrated accomplishments. Forest Managers who rely on the program to structure projects that prioritize values such as fish passage and water quality improvement can no longer track investments and outcomes, leading to a major lack of focus and accountability for road and trail maintenance and rehabilitation work over the last several years. As Congress so properly focuses on infrastructure upgrades in this Congress, it is a perfect time to bring the LRT program back to boost this critical function of the Forest Service.

Across the country, from the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia, to the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie in Representative Schrier's home state of Washington, LRT funding has allowed the Forest Service and its collaborative partners to replace over one thousand culverts to restore fish passage, maintain and stormproof thousands of miles of roads, improve five thousand miles of trails, and reclaim thousands of miles of unneeded roads to minimize the impacts of erosion and extreme flooding for nearby towns and cities.

The results are impressive. The need is substantial. Let's bring back the LRT and get the job done.

Addressing the Maintenance Backlog on Forest Service Lands

This Subcommittee fully understands the challenges of managing our immense public lands network. We appreciate the work of Congress and of the Forest Service to identify needs and provide federal funds to address public lands maintenance backlog that has been steadily mounting for decades. The Forest Service has identified a backlog of over \$3.5 billion in deferred maintenance. This estimation includes deteriorating public facilities, and most significantly, the Service's immense network of roads, bridges, and trails. The National Forest Roads system consists of more than 380,000 miles of roads, utilized to facilitate travel for visitors, Forest Service staff, and a broad spectrum of commercial uses. Without adequate funding, crumbling roads, faulty culverts, failing bridges, and washed-out trails will continue to degrade fish and wildlife habitat, national water security, and watershed resilience in the face of intensifying wildfires and catastrophic floods.

In the 116th Congress, passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) brought much needed funding to address the issue of public lands maintenance backlog, which spans multiple agencies and totals upwards of \$30 billion. A historic bipartisan accomplishment, GAOA is an important step to meet our nation's backlog needs. But the law's broad focus represents only a partial solution to the total challenge. At \$285 million-per-year for 5 years, GAOA only addresses 5 percent of the Forest Service backlog. Targeted programs like LRT will be required to address the road and trail needs. These lower profile but pressing needs include erosion from obsolete Forest Service roads and plugged culverts under road-stream crossings that don't make headlines until they fail catastrophically, undermining infrastructure, water quality, and local economies.

LRT facilitates better fishing, healthier habitat, and cleaner water on Forest Service land

Anglers understand that Forest Service lands are critical for wild trout and salmon. National Forests contain 60 percent of the blue-ribbon trout rivers and streams in our country. In Alaska's famed Tongass National Forest, the wild salmon spawned and reared there represent approximately 70 percent of all wild salmon harvested from our national forests—close to 13% of all salmon harvested on the Pacific Rim. Healthy national forests support more than fish. In the Tongass, over 70 species of mammals, including more brown bears than the entire lower 48 states combined, thrive alongside a broad diversity of bird species which nest amid the old-growth spruce and hemlock trees.

Once reestablished within the Forest Service budget, LRT can continue to facilitate the Service's work to make the system better to the benefit of anglers, wildlife, water quality, and American taxpayers at large. When they function poorly, neglected Forest roads impact visitor access, water quality, and fish and wildlife habitat. But with effective planning and funding, an infamous road-stream crossing that

poses risks to habitat and public health can quickly become a case study for seamless federal-stakeholder collaboration.

LRT has a Proven Track Record

LRT enjoys a proven record of accomplishment. Its targeted scope and results oriented focus makes the program popular among conservation groups like Trout Unlimited who work alongside the Forest Service to improve the overall quality of our federal public lands.

Between 2012 and 2015, TU leveraged approximately \$4.2 million in federal funding through the Forest Service LRT program, with outside funding sources representing over \$15 million in on-the-ground work on coldwater streams. From 2014 to 2017 Trout Unlimited utilized LRT funding in concert with other funding sources to successfully reconnect over 189 miles of streams and rivers across our national forests by replacing culverts and enhancing aquatic passage.

LRT project funding has helped the Forest Service, TU, and partners achieve outsized conservation benefits.

Eighty miles east of Seattle, in Representative Schrier's district, Legacy Roads and Trails funding allowed the Forest Service to assess and address issues within the **Upper Peshastin sub-watershed of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest**. The watershed supports spawning habitat for endangered Upper Columbia River spring Chinook, threatened upper Columbia River steelhead, and is a core habitat for threatened Columbia River bull trout. Forest Service staff removed undersized culverts and restored streambed and floodplain areas in the watershed.

In **Colorado's Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest on the headwaters of Poose Creek**, TU and the Forest Service retrofitted an aging box culvert with fish ladder that enhanced aquatic passage. This project expanded habitat for native Colorado River cutthroat trout that were previously absent from the upper reaches of the watershed.

LRT enabled **The Mores Creek Culvert Replacement Project** on the Boise National Forest in Congressman Fulcher's district. LRT contributed \$49,000, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Trout Unlimited contributed \$45,030 and another \$4,600 was provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A dangerously undersized culvert was replaced with a larger and stronger pipe arch designed to withstand more intense storms, improving safety and access for forest users. The replacement expanded habitat for native fish and other aquatic organisms.

In Representative Simpson's district, **on the McCoy Creek Drainage, within the Caribou-Targhee National Forest**, Trout Unlimited used LRT seed funding to facilitate the removal of fish passage barriers that prevented migration of native Yellowstone Cutthroat trout. The project led to the re-opening of six miles of habitat, and restored instream habitat and a healthy, fully functioning riparian zone, to the benefit of local habitat and water quality.

In the **Alleghany National Forest of Pennsylvania**, LRT funding helped TU work alongside the Forest Service and other partners to restore habitat, decommission unneeded stream crossings, and remove barriers for native Eastern brook trout, fixing decades-old legacy habitat loss problems

Trout Unlimited leveraged LRT funds in **North Carolina, including the Nantahala National Forest** to reconnect twenty miles of habitat. TU worked with the Service across six counties to improve aquatic

passage on eight tributaries of four watersheds, all within Forest Service boundaries. These projects opened habitat to North Carolina's beloved native Eastern brook trout and other native aquatic organisms.

In the **Huron-Manistee National Forest of Michigan**, efforts funded via LRT resulted in improved habitat for coldwater species, increased ecosystem resistance, and improved watershed resilience in the face of climate change.

In **Northern Wisconsin, on the Chequamegon National Forest**, TU partnered with the Forest Service on the Halley Creek Aquatic Organism Passage Project. The project replaced undersized culverts that were migration barriers, reconnecting over seven miles of high quality, Class I trout stream to the Peshtigo River. With dedicated LRT funding in place, Trout Unlimited, the Forest Service, and conservation partners will have sufficient resources to remove migration barriers for trout and salmon at road crossings in the Chequamegon National Forest and others across the country.

The Job Ahead: Future Needs

There is no shortage of available projects for TU and partners to tackle. Available funding remains the key issue to address the \$5.3 billion worth of maintenance backlog on Forest Service lands. Today, TU is working alongside the Forest Service to analyze data on key shovel-ready projects that can benefit from LRT seed money. Using Forest Service data, TU has identified at least 22 NEPA-ready projects that will improve trout and salmon habitat.

Decommissioning:

One expressed concern with the Legacy Roads and Trails Act is the notion of road decommissioning — the retirement of unused or especially decrepit roads within the Forest System.

Across Forest Service holdings, thousands of miles of roads are unneeded and unused, bleeding sediment into rivers, creeks and wetlands, endangering fish, and other aquatic wildlife. These same roads, when coupled with extreme weather and failed, undersized culverts, pose the risk of full-scale blowouts which worsen flood impacts for downstream communities and maximize repair costs for the Forest Service's limited maintenance budget.

LRT does not operate outside the scope of the standard Forest Service decommissioning process. In fact, decommissioning projects that LRT addresses are only those that have already been approved by the Forest Service via NEPA and the public comment process. LRT funding helps those planners and matching partners get over the hump and get the work done.

Forest Service decommissioning projects have incredibly limited impacts on visitor access. From FY 2012-2020, the Forest Service Road System decreased 0.46%—less than 0.06% per year. In FY2012 there were 372,046 miles of road compared to 370,331 miles in FY2020. Road closures due to intensifying storm damage and poor maintenance practices have a much greater impact on access. For example, in the Winter of 2016, one storm in Washington State eliminated one third of access points due to road failures and landslides in a popular section of the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest. Top recreation destinations for snowmobilers, hikers, campers, and climbers were closed for years. In 2017, winter storms damaged nearly 1,900 road sites in California, requiring over \$22 million in repairs. Again,

decommissioning is not about restricting access. It is about “right-sizing” for Forest Road System, ensuring good return on federal investments, to the benefit of American taxpayers.

Support for H.R. 3211, the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Act of 2021.

The Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership is a collaborative effort between the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve the health of forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Since the program’s inception in 2014, the initiative has supported 93 projects, treated 300,000 acres of hazardous fuels, restored 29,000 acres in priority watersheds, and enhanced 200,000 acres of wildlife habitat. Trout Unlimited has contributed to the Joint Chiefs initiative by developing key aquatic organism passage projects on the Monongahela National Forest and the Tillamook-Nestucca Salmon “Superhighway” in Oregon, which restored access for six distinct species of fish to 180 miles of blocked habitat and created jobs for local communities.

The bipartisan legislation being considered by the subcommittee today, H.R. 3211, is critical to continuing the work started by the Joint Chiefs’ Partnership. The bill would formally establish the program at USDA, double its funding to \$90 million to help meet project demand, and improve the outreach and accountability of the program. Trout Unlimited supports this bill, as it would support projects across public and private lands that reduce wildfire risk, protect water supplies, or improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species, all while improving the health and resilience of America’s forests.

Support for H.R. 4300, the Veterans in Parks (VIP) Act.

In ever-growing numbers, our TU members and local chapters are stepping up to provide healing, rehabilitation, hope, and community to impacted veterans and their families. The TU Service Partnership is a nationwide effort initiated in 2011 to bring the healing power of the water to those who have served in our nation’s armed forces.

The VIP Act before the subcommittee today aids servicemembers as they transition back into civilian life. The VIP act codifies and protects the America the Beautiful Pass, establishing lifetime, instead of annual, passes for veterans while also providing free annual passes to active service members. This pass provides access to more than 2,000 federal recreation areas including our national parks, national forests, and wildlife refuges. Trout Unlimited supports this bipartisan legislation which would allow service members and veterans the freedom to enjoy our great outdoors.

Conclusion:

For decades, the Forest Service has utilized the best science and their innovative model of collaborative stewardship to confront mounting maintenance backlog costs. While Legacy Roads and Trails it is not a complete answer to all the agency’s transportation system management challenges, the program offers a powerful and efficient solution to the key set of maintenance issues—aquatic passage-focused restoration and maintenance—identified by the legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Trout Unlimited appreciates the Chairman Neguse’s leadership, and the commitment of Representatives Schrier, Kilmer, and Simpson to achieve a healthy, well-functioning Forest Service road and trail system.

Thank you to the Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing. We look forward to working with all of you to advance the Legacy Road and Trails Act.