



July 26, 2018

**MEMBER
JURISDICTIONS**

City of Glenwood
Springs

City of Steamboat
Springs

EAGLE COUNTY

Avon
Basalt
Eagle
Gypsum
Minturn
Red Cliff
Vail

GRAND COUNTY

Fraser
Granby
Grand Lake
Hot Sulphur Springs
Kremmling
Winter Park

JACKSON COUNTY

Walden

PITKIN COUNTY

Aspen
Snowmass Village

SUMMIT COUNTY

Breckenridge
Blue River
Dillon
Frisco
Montezuma

(Only address to one at a time, show CC of others at bottom)

Senator Cory Gardner

Senator Michael Bennet

Congressman Jared Polis

Congressman Scott Tipton

Dear Congressmen (Last Name),

Thank you for your recent efforts to provide a “fire funding fix” to the United States Forest Service (USFS) fire formula. The escalating cost of fighting fire has imperiled the operational effectiveness of the USFS in recent years, and impaired the organization’s ability to manage the national forests as premier public assets and multi-use natural resources.

Municipalities and counties in the northwest Colorado region adjacent to the White River National Forest (WRNF) know how important active management of forest assets is to public safety, and local economies, and to the sustainability of hosting nearly 15 million year-round visitors annually. We coordinate very closely with the 5 WRNF ranger districts and are concerned that without further Congressional engagement to shepherd this fire funding fix “dividend” back into front country recreation programs and forest management (including fire mitigation) that success may be squandered.

In spite of Good Neighbor investment by local communities, we believe that decreased USFS funding has meant that the National Forests often fail to match the high management standards expected by our local communities. This places the natural resource and the visitor experience at risk. Our mountain communities invest heavily in creating a world-class experience on our local public trails, parks and open spaces. We have strived in high country Colorado, as Wallace Stegner challenged Westerners to do, “to create a society to match our scenery.” Many local jurisdictions have been backfilling USFS staffing budgets for a variety of front country ranger roles which were fully funded by the USFS not so long ago. Lately the forest isn’t being managed to match our society.

As an example, one WRNF Ranger District recently announced closure of two campgrounds with the possibility of more closures. That district is spending 14% of what it was a decade ago on front country recreation management, and this summer only has one full-time seasonal employee. In 2008, that district funded 7 FTE dedicated to front country management. A difference in investment, \$270,000 in 2008 to \$40,000 in 2018, contrasts with a steep increase in user days during all seasons, including a housing affordability problem impacting nearby forests while broad forest health issues go largely unmitigated. The lack of field-level management places those lands at increased risk for fire and being loved-to-death.

It is distressing that the #1 most visited National Forest in the nation, which sends \$24,000,000 in revenues from skier area fees annually to the Federal Government, can only afford to fund one seasonal ranger to manage one of the busiest recreation programs in the nation. Though the Ski Area Retention bill highlights one key relationship with ski areas that is undermanaged, and would keep revenues from skier area fees local, we believe is too narrowly focused a solution to address the manifold operational challenges facing the WRNF and other heavily impacted national forests.

Jurisdictions in the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments region are adjacent to the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forest, the Pike and San Isabel National Forest, the Gunnison National Forest as well as the White River National Forest which is the specific subject of this letter. Restoring funding is important to communities, large and small adjacent to each of these National Forests.

The counties listed below have been good neighbors to the WRNF by dedicating significant resources to the USFS and partner entities like the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps that do work on the national forests. Investments include fire mitigation activities on private and public properties adjacent to National Forest and assisting in enforcement during high wildfire risk seasons. These efforts are in addition to those captured in this table below, which lists some examples of direct investment to backfill WRNF staffing in recent years, including:

Summit County (2018) (8 entities)	\$86,000/year	Seasonal USFS patrol, fire prevention
Garfield County (2015 – 2017)	\$5,000-\$22K/year	Supplemental staffing for Hanging Lake
Pitkin County (2014-2018)	\$9,000-\$78,000/year	Trail, forest treatment, prescribed fire
Eagle County entities (prop for 2019)	\$0 -\$147,000/year	Front Country Ranger Program

Despite these close relationships and willingness to provide municipal and County resources to help manage recreation programs, it is worth noting that this “bake sale” approach to USFS management cannot last forever. These communities will always be good neighbors, but as markets rise and fall, it cannot be said for certain whether such financial capacity will continue. These lands are enjoyed by people from across the country. A well-funded Forest Service is a federal responsibility.

We urge the Colorado Congressional delegates representing USFS lands to advocate with the Appropriations Committee to increase the USFS funding to key management areas mentioned above, to weigh in on this matter with Secretary Purdue, and to consider amending or replacing the Ski Area Retention Bill with a broader solution that restores funding and operational effectiveness to district rangers across all forests.

Thank you for your consideration.

Karn Stiegelmeier, NWCCOG Council Chair

Date

Jeanne McQueeney, Eagle County Chair

Date

Dan Gibbs, Summit County Chair

Date

Eric Mamula, Town of Breckenridge Mayor

Date

Anne McKibbin, Town of Eagle Mayor

Date

Philip Vandernail, Town of Fraser Mayor

Date

Dave Chapin, Town of Vail Mayor

Date

CC: (only 3 will be cc'ed)
Senator Cory Gardner
Senator Michael Bennet
Congressman Jared Polis
Congressman Scott Tipton