FOREST NEWS

Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics

Fall 2025

Monongahela National Forest

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ICE RAIDS FIREFIGHTERS / SUPPORT FOR ROADLESS RULE / LASTING IMPACTS OF RETARDANT / GUEST ESSAY: WOLVES AND FOREST HEALTH

A Tumultuous Nine Months at the Forest Service

Forest Service employees have endured a tumultuous nine months since Donald Trump returned to the White House. With promises to "shatter the Deep State" and downsize the federal workforce, the president appointed an Office of Management and Budget director who said federal employees "are increasingly viewed as villains," who he wants to "put in trauma." Trump authorized unfettered access for the Department of Government Efficiency to review government functions and create new levels of approvals (so much for efficiency). He appointed the first-ever Forest Service chief with no agency experience. Typical of this administration, it made political appointments that are pulling the Forest Service in different directions. Some want to see the agency disbanded. Some prefer a Forest Service reduced to a fraction of its former size. Others emphasize efficiency, mainly by trimming the workforce.

So, what has work been like for employees?

When the new chief was appointed, he scheduled agency-wide all-hands calls, but the calls were canceled — including one at the very last minute. Employees were asked to submit five things they accomplished each week, yet when responses were submitted, they bounced back because the inbox was full. Forest Service employees — along with other federal employees — have been encouraged to abandon their careers in the face of a reduction-in-force plan that could result in layoffs, relocations, reassignments, or demotions.

Employees on temporary probation — largely new employees representing the next generation of civil servants but also some seasoned employees — have been fired, reinstated, and then encouraged to resign. Applications for federal jobs are now a loyalty test, with four questions asking how applicants will align with the administration and its priorities. As the Supreme Court grants broad authority to the Executive Branch, it appears that the era of nonpartisan government workers is ending. We are returning to the cronyism and patronage of the 1800s.

Unsurprisingly, we are experiencing the largest resignation of civil servants in U.S. history. Around 300,000 left the government from February through September. Around 5,000-6,000 employees left the Forest Service, about 15-20% of the workforce. Remaining Forest Service employees say, "Work is nearly impossible" in this "chaotic" work environment characterized by "false start after false start."

The Deep State is often mis-characterized as civil servants carrying out an undemocratic shadow agenda. But there is actually a deeper force — amorphous, apolitical, and affirming — that is proving resistant to the current situation. It is the dedication of federal employees who believe in good governance and effective civil service, including agency employees striving for responsible stewardship of our land and resources. FSEEE applauds the civil servants of the Forest Service who are caring for our treasured lands. Ensuring federal actions and decision-making are transparent, legal, and inclusive of public input resists the erosion of the civil service and reinforces our democracy. In times like these, the quiet determination of federal workers conducting their work provides a real beacon of hope.

Sincerely,
A 30-year Forest Service employee

Inside

Cover: Bear Rocks offer a misty sunrise vista on the Monongahela National Forest.

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Featured Forest

Monongahela National Forest

Located in the Allegheny Mountains of eastern West Virginia, Monongahela National Forest encompasses 921,000 acres, with elevations ranging from just under 1,000 feet to 4,863 feet above sea level. The Forest includes much of the Potomac Highlands Region and major landform features such as the Allegheny Front and the western portion of the ridge-and-valley Appalachians. The highest mountain in West Virginia, Spruce Knob, rises from the Monongahela and is also the highest peak in the Allegheny Mountains.

Almost all of the trees in the Monongahela are second-growth forest that have re-established after the land was heavily logged around the start of the 20th century; nonetheless, the Forest is home to 75 tree species. Important species include red spruce, balsam fir, and mountain ash.

The Forest also includes eight wilderness areas:

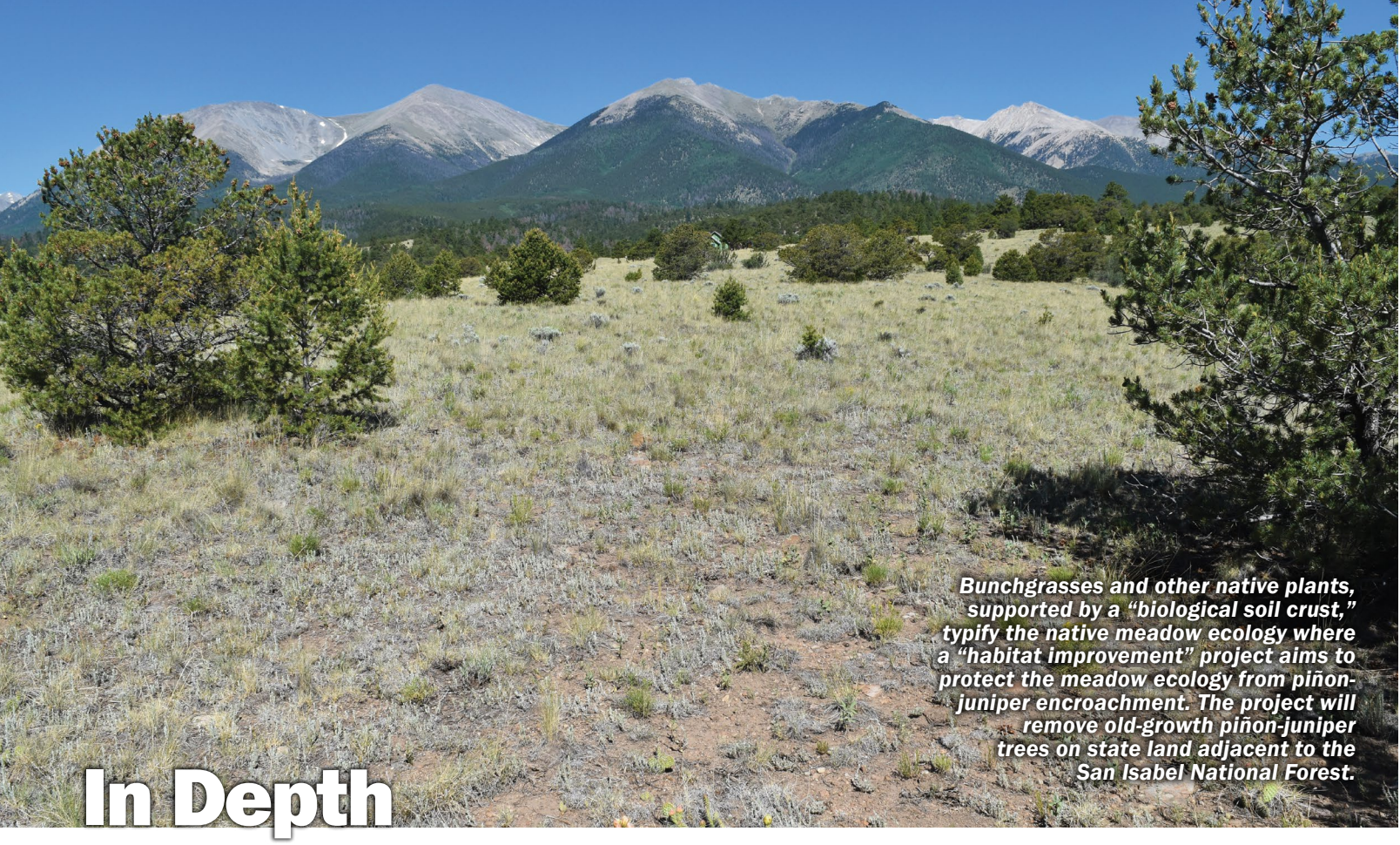
- Big Draft Wilderness
- Cranberry Wilderness
- Dolly Sods Wilderness
- Laurel Fork North Wilderness
- Laurel Fork South Wilderness
- Otter Creek Wilderness
- Roaring Plains West Wilderness
- Spice Run Wilderness

The Monongahela National Forest was established following passage of the 1911 Weeks Act, which authorized the purchase of land for long-term watershed protection and natural resource management following the massive cutting of Eastern forests in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1915, the 7,200-acre Monongahela Purchase began the process that culminated in the establishment of the Monongahela National Forest in 1920.

From the 1890s to the 1920s, whitetail deer were hunted almost to extinction in the Alleghenies. In January 1930, eight deer from Michigan were released into the Forest, and from 1937 to 1939, 17 more deer were introduced. These releases established healthy breeding populations in eastern West Virginia.

Popular recreation activities in the Forest include hiking, mountain biking, camping, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing.

Amid early autumn foliage, water from Hills Creek cascades over Lower Falls in Monongahela National Forest.



Bunchgrasses and other native plants, supported by a "biological soil crust," typify the native meadow ecology where a "habitat improvement" project aims to protect the meadow ecology from piñon-juniper encroachment. The project will remove old-growth piñon-juniper trees on state land adjacent to the San Isabel National Forest.

In Depth

Piñon-Juniper Forests

Piñon-juniper woodlands may not inspire the kind of awe that people experience among the redwoods of California or the old-growth Douglas-fir trees of the Pacific Northwest, but piñon-juniper forests are one of the most extensive ecosystems in western North America and provide a high level of species diversity compared to other ecosystems in the region. Many of these woodlands have grown increasingly dense over the past 150-200 years, and federal land managers, acting under the belief that this expansion is unnatural, have consistently prioritized piñon-juniper removal for the purpose of restoring grassland and shrubland habitats.

A recent study led by plant ecologist Robert Shriver (University of Nevada – Reno) challenges the longstanding belief that increasing tree densities in these arid woodlands are the result of human activity, thereby challenging the justification for extensive removal of piñon and juniper trees. The study suggests that the increasing tree densities in piñon-juniper ecosystems "may be better explained by long-term tree population dynamics than by fire suppression, livestock grazing, and climatic changes."

Shriver said, "We've known that the density and canopy cover of pinyon pine and juniper trees in the Great Basin and much of the western U.S. has increased substantially over the last century," but evidence to explain the expansion has remained elusive. Shriver's research team, which includes Alexandra Urza, a research ecologist with the Forest Service, found no link between the increased tree density and fire suppression in piñon-juniper woodlands. Instead, the findings of Shriver's team "indicate that long-term population growth can predict a substantial portion of post-settlement ... increases in pinyon–juniper woodlands" and that piñon-juniper density has likely been increasing for at least the last 400 years.

"What we've discovered," Shriver said, "is that populations can grow steadily through inherent demographic processes. It can look like a dramatic shift when it's actually a natural continuation." So, how do the findings of the Shriver study hold up when compared to other research on piñon-juniper forests?

A 2004 study by Peter Soulé, Paul Knapp, and Henri Grissino-Mayer investigated "rapid rates of expansion" in Western juniper and the human activities "presented as the primary agents of change," i.e., "domestic livestock grazing, fire suppression." The researchers

found, "The traditionally cited disturbance mechanisms can accelerate establishment rates of western juniper, especially with domestic livestock grazing on sites that are downslope from established woodlands. However, we also found that establishment rates are generally accelerated regardless of the active disturbance regime, suggesting some other driving mechanism has either appeared, or become more dominant.... In summary, we emphasize that the relative contributions of agents of change can exhibit significant temporal variability, and that new agents may emerge."

Perhaps the Shriver study reveals a previously unacknowledged "agent of change" — i.e., greater reproductive potential resulting from larger populations of mature trees. Or maybe it fails to adequately consider the established narrative of human-induced factors like fire suppression and livestock grazing. While the Soulé study leaves room for Shriver's conclusions, it also indicates ground disturbance from grazing in sagebrush country is likely a factor in expansion of piñon-juniper woodlands into grassland and sagebrush ecosystems that support at-risk species like sage grouse.

Cattle grazing across the arid West has long been linked to significant ecosystem alterations. As it turns out, ground disturbance from livestock grazing has had a far greater impact on piñon-juniper forests than wildfire suppression. A 2003 study conducted in Mesa Verde National Park concludes, "Stand structure, composition, and fire behavior have not been substantially altered by 20th-century fire suppression.... The fire regime has always been dominated by infrequent stand-replacing fires ... occurring at intervals of many centuries."

A 2004 review of the science on piñon-juniper forests states, "There are no reliable estimates of mean fire intervals for low-severity surface fires in these woodlands.... The fire rotation for high-severity fires is estimated in only two studies, 400 years in one case, 480 years in the other." The authors conclude, "Fire plans and assessments of the condition and health of piñon-juniper woodlands in the western United States are based on premature and likely incorrect conclusions about the natural fire regime in piñon-juniper woodlands." The report continues, "Local research is essential ... if effective, scientifically based restoration prescriptions are to be derived."

A 2004 study focusing on the Colorado Plateau concludes, "The historical fire rotations both within the [Mesa Verde National] park (ca. 400 years) and on the entire cuesta (substantially greater than 400 years) were far longer than is commonly assumed for piñon-juniper vegetation."

A 2013 study conducted on the Colorado National Monument "supports the findings of other recent studies

A piñon-jumiper mastication project in Colorado is targeting "old age class forest canopies," including this piñon tree estimated to be 300 years old. Wildfire resilience and deer and elk habitat improvement provide the justification for the destruction of these old-growth trees. (Mastication can reduce a tree to mulch in a matter of minutes.)

A piñon-juniper forest has been transformed into a cheatgrass monoculture following a wildfire in Nevada's White Pine Range on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

in persistent piñon-juniper woodlands on the Colorado Plateau, which have found long fire-free intervals.... The implications of these long fire rotations are that these woodlands have not been substantially changed by fire exclusion in the past century and, therefore, are not outside of their historic range of variation in stand structure, fire frequency, and fire behavior. As such, prescribed underburns or mechanical thinning of these forests do not represent ecological restoration and, in fact, can do long-term damage by removing old-growth trees and opening up sites for invasion by introduced species."

Furthermore, "the present study significantly expands the known range of fire-free intervals for piñon-juniper woodlands. With an abundance of trees approaching 1,000 years ... this area has likely not experienced a large-scale fire for time scales approaching a millennium."

A 2018 Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station report finds, "Invasive annual grasses [primarily cheatgrass] and associated increases in fire are counter-balancing the effects of tree expansion and resulting in net losses of piñon and juniper land cover types.... Careful monitoring of longer-term trends in fire activity and the interacting effects of invasive annual grasses ... is needed to better understand the dynamics of piñon and juniper land cover types."

The recurring themes that emerge from these studies are:

- Human intervention, mainly livestock grazing, is a factor in piñon-juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems.
- Insufficient data exists to justify removal of piñon-juniper woodlands as an effective strategy for restoring sagebrush ecosystems.
- The centuries-long natural fire rotation demonstrates that humanfire suppression is not a significant factor in woodland expansion for piñon-juniper forests.

But just as livestock grazing has contributed to piñon-juniper incursion into sagebrush and grassland ecosystems, livestock are linked to changes in wildfire frequency and severity through their role in spreading invasive weeds, especially cheatgrass, which threatens not only sagebrush habitat and grasslands, but also piñon-juniper forests. The authors of a 2024 report — *Cheatgrass invasions: History, causes, consequences, and solutions* — identify cheatgrass invasion as "one of the most significant ecological crises facing land managers in the arid West."

According to the report, "Cheatgrass promotes unnaturally large and frequent fires that cement its dominance as a weed monoculture of little value to either livestock or native wildlife. Cheatgrass invasions impoverish native ecosystems and degrade or even eliminate habitat function for native animals, exacerbating the biodiversity crisis. As cheatgrass increases, it fuels larger and more frequent fires that eliminate shrub cover, further stress native grasses, and contribute to increasing levels of cheatgrass dominance."

As demonstrated by the multitude of studies cited in the cheatgrass report, the weed is a formidable opponent that "can outcompete native grasses for water and nutrients because it is already actively growing when native plants

are initiating growth." Cheatgrass "ultimately drains soils of available nitrogen, which helps cheatgrass exclude native grasses" and exhausts other soil nutrients needed by native plants. The report also shows that cheatgrass "depletes soil water in spring much more rapidly than native species," preventing the survival of native seedlings and subjecting adult native plants to moisture stress.

The report's recommendations for preventing cheatgrass expansion and dominance emphasize avoiding soil disturbance, which "creates a seedbed for cheatgrass." Native ground cover in and around piñon-juniper woodlands consists of a living "biological soil crust" and perennial bunchgrasses. The combination of "biocrust" and bunchgrasses creates a synergy that resists cheatgrass invasion. Soil-disturbing machinery invites cheatgrass establishment by destroying the biocrust and damaging native grasses. In many cases, the heavy equipment used in so-called forest health treatments even introduces cheatgrass seeds to the freshly disturbed ground.

The cheatgrass report specifically addresses piñon-juniper ecosystems, recommending prevention of piñon-juniper removal in mature woodlands: "In areas where pinyon/juniper expansion is in the early stages and a healthy understory of native grasses and shrubs is present, limit tree removal to hand-cutting to preclude disturbance by heavy machinery that encourages cheatgrass invasion."

The majority of federal piñon-juniper removal projects are accomplished with heavy, ground-disturbing equipment. Chaining — the practice of dragging a heavy chain between two bulldozers to uproot large swaths of trees — may be the most egregious example of piñon-juniper ecosystem destruction. Mastication, almost as destructive as chaining and equally likely to introduce or exacerbate cheatgrass infestations, can turn an old-growth tree into mulch in a few minutes.

Cheatgrass is also fire-tolerant, with viable seeds surviving wildfires and prescribed burns. The ease with which cheatgrass is ignited contributes to increased fire frequency, and the post-fire landscape can experience a 4-5 times increase in cheatgrass coverage, according to the cheatgrass report, which specifically warns of the risk to "late-succession pinyon-juniper woodland."

Shriver and his fellow researchers found that piñon-juniper establishment rates are near their lowest point in 400 years and recommend land management strategies that "recognize the possibility of woodland decline and range contraction." So while piñon-juniper removal may have been a reasonable forest management strategy under certain conditions, a significant body of science now indicates that strategy is outdated and, in fact, causes far more harm than benefit.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

A recent article says cattle may help get rid of cheatgrass once it is established because the seeds are completely digested. I question the wisdom of this.

Trampling by cattle disturbs the soil, making it more susceptible to invasive species and causing streambed disturbances. An animal unit month is a cow-calf combination weighing 1,000 pounds. One animal unit month displaces two elk or five deer.

Only three percent of the nation's cattle are ruining a huge percentage of the country's public lands. Getting cattle off of public lands would add only a few pennies to the price of a burger, if that.

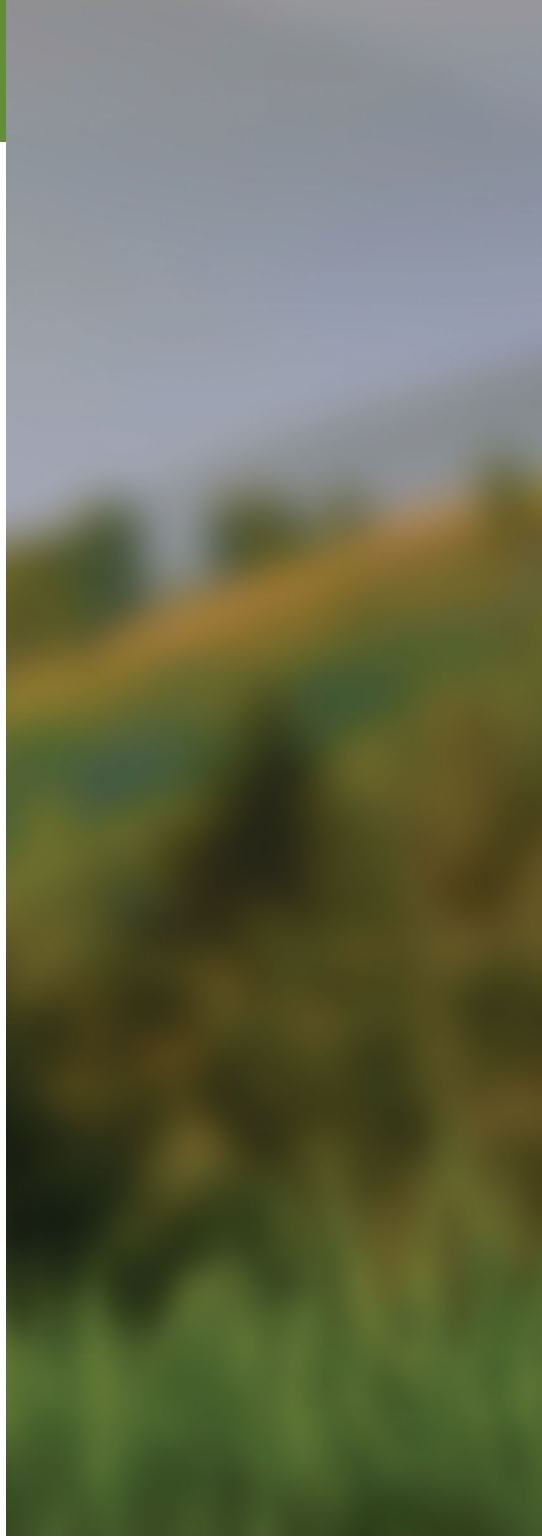
Sincerely,
Constance

Four years after a Colorado "forest-health" project masticated mature piñon-juniper forest, cheatgrass (purplish, tan and green) has invaded, and the remaining trees are stressed or dead.

Guest Column

Wolves and Forest Health

by Delia Malone



Wolves represent wilderness. Colonizers viewed wilderness as a frontier to be conquered and converted into a landscape that mirrored Europe. This meant that wolves had to go. So, as Michael Robinson writes in *Predatory Buereaucracy*, wolves were killed with a vengeance not experienced by any other wildlife species — a vengeance that continues today in much of the United States.

Just as Aldo Leopold originally believed that "because fewer wolves meant more deer, no wolves would mean hunter's paradise." A common refrain among ranchers is, "There's a reason that we got rid of the apex predator in the first place." Yes, without wolves on the landscape, ranchers could graze their livestock without human supervision, but unforeseen and far-reaching ecological changes resulted from both wolf extirpation and unmanaged livestock grazing.

Mitochondrial DNA evidence implies a population of around 400,000 wolves in the western U.S. and Mexico since the last glaciation and prior to European expansion. In just a few short decades, between the 1880s and 1920s, the war on wolves had all but exterminated them from the lower 48 states. The rapid loss of this ecological keystone carnivore reverberated throughout the landscape.

Preceding the extirpation of wolves, there was the market-hunting-driven loss of native ungulates followed by severe overstocking of the range with livestock. In response to the demise of native prey, wolves turned to livestock for their prey. In response, the livestock industry used its political clout to fund a state bounty system to trap, hunt, and kill wolves. As Robinson has documented, only a handful of lone wolves survived into the 1930s and '40s. The widespread use of strychnine was the wolf's death knell. Poisoned animal carcasses were left out for wolves, and those carcasses also killed eagles, ravens, foxes, bears, and any animals that fed on the poisoned carrion. In Colorado wolves were functionally exterminated by 1900. According to Robinson, Colorado's last wolf, Lobo, was killed in 1945 in Conejos County.

Data from Rocky Mountain National Park shows that market hunting had generally eliminated elk by 1880. Yet, wolves and other predators were designated a threat to big game and targeted for elimination. Gray wolves, the only significant predator of elk in the region, were largely absent from Colorado by 1900. In 1915 when Congress designated Rocky Mountain National Park, wolves were gone, other apex predators had been greatly reduced in number, and elk from Yellowstone had to be introduced to the park. Today in Rocky Mountain National Park, elk management practices seek to restore the ecosystem by substituting wolves with human interventions. But as demonstrated by a study published in 2014, this "functionalist" strategy substitutes the role of wolves in the ecosystem with human intervention and implicitly conflates the role or function of wolves with wolves themselves.

In his book *The Wilderness Hunter*, Theodore Roosevelt referred to wolves as "the beasts of waste and desolation." As he learned more about North American predators, Roosevelt's opinions changed,

A wolf surveys its territory from a ridgetop in the Rocky Mountains.

but his statement represented the prevailing view of the early 1900s in Yellowstone National Park. As a result, wolves were eliminated from the Park by 1926. Even though elk were still preyed upon by cougars and bears, a 2003 article by Douglas Smith et al., "Yellowstone after Wolves," shows that the absence of wolves in Yellowstone took huge predatory pressure off elk, resulting in increased browsing on key forest species such as aspen and cottonwood as well as willow shrublands. Increased browsing pressure resulted in the decline of these forests and shrublands, impacts which rippled throughout Yellowstone's ecosystems.

As documented in multiple studies, aspen forests are one of our most species-rich Rocky Mountain ecological systems, supporting numerous other organisms with a greater variety of plant associations than the typical conifer forests as well as increased bird species richness and total abundance. Yellowstone's declining aspen ecosystems also result in diminished biodiversity, broken

Two elk find easy food and water in the riparian zone of the Madison River in Yellowstone National Park. The reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone has prompted elk to adapt more natural patterns of movement, allowing riparian-zone ecosystems to recover from overbrowsing.

ecosystem connections, and altered system processes. Yellowstone ecosystems not only responded to the absence of wolves but to their return — i.e., species relationships changed with their absence and reciprocally with their restoration.

"Rewilding the American West," a 2022 paper published in *Bioscience*, demonstrates that, as an apex predator, wolves can trigger strong ecological effects on prey and plants across a variety of landscapes of western North America, including aspen forests. With the restoration of wolves and a corresponding increase in the abundance of cougars and grizzlies in Yellowstone National Park, the elk population was appropriately reduced, and their behavior changed.

Smith et al. demonstrate that, instead of remaining stationary in the winter and overbrowsing aspen, cottonwood, and willow near streams, elk responded to wolves by moving around, which mitigated ecosystem damage, especially in riparian zones. Aspen began regenerating for the first time since wolf extirpation in 1926.

Wolves make landscapes healthier by keeping elk populations within ecological carrying capacity so that vegetation thrives. Regenerating woody vegetation provides habitat for other species, reestablishing ecosystem connections and re-enabling system processes such as nutrient cycling and energy flow. As the Smith study shows, aspen forests and riparian woodlands and shrublands regenerated after elk browsing pressure decreased. As a result, songbird diversity increased, beavers returned, and stream health is recovering. Wolves initiated a trophic cascade that restored ecological connections and relationships.

A recently published long-term study (1998-2021) of aspen recruitment in Yellowstone shows that restoration of large carnivores in the late 20th century resulted in a sustained reduction of Rocky Mountain elk and their overbrowsing, which facilitated new growth of quaking aspen saplings. Researchers found that both aspen saplings (≥2 m tall) and small trees were absent in 1998 but increased rapidly after 2007 to a mean density in 2020-21 of 1,460 small trees per hectare and that 43% of stands contained a new cohort of small trees (5-10 cm dbh), the first documented recruitment of overstory aspen trees in northern Yellowstone since the 1940s.

A Canada jay perches on an aspen branch in Colorado.

Across the Intermountain West, aspen forests are hotspots of biodiversity. In Colorado, there are more aspen forests than in any other state in the West, covering 5 million acres, more than any other forest type in Colorado (20% of Colorado's forested land). As demonstrated by Kouki et al., because aspen forests cover a large area and provide refuge for a high diversity of native species, their protection provides outsized capacity for influencing regional and continental biodiversity.

But across the West, aspen stands have recently shown substantial decreases. Multiple studies show that primary threats to aspen ecosystems include fire suppression, drought-triggered mortality, chronic browsing of young aspen shoots by elk (resulting from a decrease in natural predators), and livestock.

Bird species diversity is high in healthy aspen forests. Conversely, where aspen stands in the southwest U.S. are in decline, bird diversity has decreased. About a third of all American bird species are of high or moderate concern due to low populations, declining trends, or other threats. Because aspen ecosystems and even small patches of aspen provide habitat for a disproportionately high number of bird species, protecting and conserving aspen forests and woodlands warrants conservation focus and is important to preventing continued declines.

Aspen woodlands are centers of bird abundance and diversity, but a 2017 U.S. Geological Survey report shows that they have been adversely affected by land-use practices, particularly livestock grazing. Likewise, a 2022 study by Ripple et al. demonstrates that retirement of grazing allotments within potential reserves offers great benefits for biodiversity.

Contemporary forest management needs radical re-visioning to stewardship that relies on native species and processes to restore ecosystem function and health. Grazing-allotment retirement provides a strategy for rewilding the landscape to restore native biodiversity to its rightful place in the self-management of wild populations guided by a complete suite of native carnivores, especially gray wolves.

Delia Malone is an ecologist with the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (retired). She is also the founder and president of ColoradoWild, wildlife chair for Colorado Sierra Club, and vice chair of Roaring Fork Audubon. As a field ecologist for the past 30 years, she's conducted ecological assessments and biological surveys across Colorado. These decades of ecological and biological analyses have informed Malone's purpose and demonstrated the need for protecting and restoring native wildlife and plants to Colorado wildlands. When she isn't conducting field surveys, you can find Malone hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, or birding.

Briefly

Photographer Preston Keres captured this photo of Supervisory Forestry Technician Ben McLane while McLane was fighting fires on the Mt. Hood National Forest in July 2023 (Forest Service photo).

Morale Tanks as Firefighters Clean Toilets, Mow Lawns

Mass layoffs, deferred resignation offers, and other policies from a hostile administration eliminated record numbers of Forest Service employees earlier this year. Firefighters were supposedly exempt from these job cuts, but Forest Service firefighters, already understaffed, have been left to take up the slack outside their firefighting roles.

Reporting for *Capital and Main*, Jeremy Lindenfeld writes, some firefighters "now clean toilets while others mow lawns around ranger stations." Some employees have said, "Firefighters have been prevented from joining fire suppression efforts because of these new responsibilities."

While agency leadership claims it has exceeded its hiring goal for wildland firefighters, internal data, first reported by ProPublica, reveals thousands of vacant firefighter positions across the country.

Former Forest Service employees with firefighting experience describe a demoralized workforce that is stretched increasingly thin by inadequate staffing and uncertainty caused by Trump policies.

Extensive buttress roots characterize this old-growth kapok tree in the Amazon rainforest.

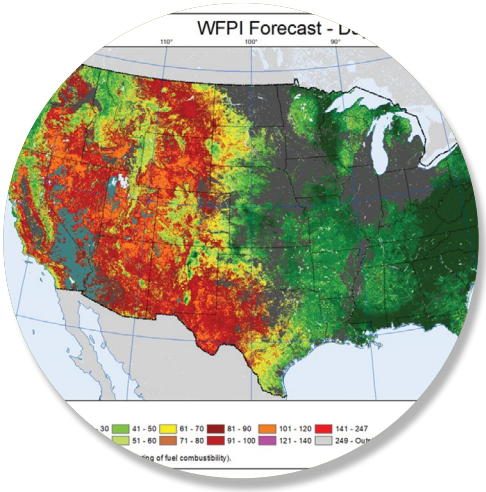
Intact Old-Growth Forests Show Climate Resilience

A recently published paper reveals old-growth resilience to climate shifts in the Amazon Basin.

"Our results can be understood as a sign of the resilience of Amazonian forests, showing that any impacts of climate change on larger trees have been more than alleviated by the effects of CO_2 fertilization."

The ability of old-growth trees to thrive while maximizing sequestration of atmospheric carbon adds yet another layer of science validating the critical importance of intact old-growth forests.

Meanwhile, these critical ecosystems continue to be compromised by road-building, logging and burning to facilitate unsustainable practices like livestock grazing. A similar fate awaits wilderness forests within the National Forest System — our most valuable resources for protecting water supplies, preserving biodiversity, and sequestering carbon — if the Roadless Area Conservation Rule is repealed.



This Wildland Fire Potential Index map provides a general idea of what a wildfire-risk map would look like (U.S. Geological Survey image).

Incentivizing Fire-Safe Development

Citing "short-sighted fire suppression policies and the rapid influx of people and development in hazardous regions," Meghan Hodges argues for incentivizing wildfire-safe developments through fire-hazard mapping coupled with fire-adapted building codes and robust code enforcement.

Hodges' assessment was recently published in the *Duke Law Journal* and calls for spending federal monies to "prophylactically prioritize risk reduction" based on hazard mapping instead of the current (and more costly) approach of responding to fire disasters after they happen.

To ensure that federal funding reduces the damage from wildfire disasters, Hodges calls on Congress to help local and state governments by identifying "at-risk regions through hazard mapping and conditioning future aid on proactive resilience efforts."

While wildfire-risk mapping "can enhance a community's awareness of its risk of wildfire," Hodges advocates for "an enforcement mechanism so that individual developers or communities cannot side-step heightened building codes."

Fire Retardant Leaves Lasting Impacts on Waterways

During the high-risk fire season of 2020, retardant-laden slurry bombers were scrambled to attack a small fire in Alberta's mountains. One payload of Phos-Chek retardant was delivered directly into North Racehorse Creek, turning the stream red.

University of Alberta researchers with the Southern Rockies Watershed Project measured the impacts on the aquatic ecosystem just two weeks after the incident, sampling water at key points along the stream.

The samples showed 33% more phosphorus in the water where the retardant was dropped and 133% more a kilometer (0.6 mile) downstream compared to water samples collected upstream from the incident.

The research team returned a year later and took additional samples, which revealed 167% more phosphorus in the water 6 kilometers downstream with significant phosphorous remaining in stream sediments. The researchers' recently published report focuses on phosphorous contamination and does not document the extent of retardant-induced heavy metals contamination nor the number of fish killed.

North Racehorse Creek in Alberta, Canada, runs red shortly after aerial fire retardant was dumped into it on Aug. 15, 2020 (Government of Alberta photo).

Secretaries Order Consolidation of Federal Firefighting

The Forest Service and other federal agencies missed the deadline of Sept. 10 to implement President Donald Trump's Executive Order 14308 mandating consolidation of federal firefighting into a single agency in the Department of Interior.

A week later, the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture issued orders directing establishment of the U.S. Wildland Fire Service to be implemented in January 2026 with the Interior Department leading the new "agency."

The Interior Secretary's order claims, "Unification of targeted administrative functions and consistent application of policy between the two departments will yield immediate and significant improvements to the national wildfire response system."

According to the order, these wildfire-response improvements will be realized through a restructuring process that will "eliminate redundancy and misalignment."

The joint orders fail to include specifics, and the prospect of improving upon the current three-decade firefighting track record — 98% wildfire containment at 100 acres or less — is slim to none.

A Forest Service firefighter is silhouetted by the 2017 Boundary Fire on the Kaibab National Forest. Pursuant to executive and secretarial orders, wildland firefighting is being consolidated under the Interior Department.

Forest Legacy Management Flexibility Bill

Introduced by California Congressmen John Garamendi (D) and Ken Calvert (R), the Forest Legacy Management Flexibility Bill (H.R.2771) "would give states the option to designate accredited, nonprofit land trusts to hold conservation easements purchased with federal funding from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program," according to a press release from the congressmen.

Garamendi said the bill "would unlock millions in federal funding to help states conserve working forestlands, create good-paying jobs, and support sustainable forest management practices that reduce wildfire risk."

The congressman's comments euphemistically suggest the bill would allow millions of federal dollars to fund subsidies for various types of logging operations on private lands:

- "Working forestlands" are commercial woodlands that are logged for timber.
- "Forest management practices that reduce wildfire risk" are logging under the guise of so-called forest health treatments.

H.R.2771 would provide access to millions of federal dollars to support forest management on private lands like those shown in this photo.

Dispatch

Fire Management Team Implicated in ICE Raid

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials interfered with an active wildland firefighting campaign and arrested two men working to contain the Bear Gulch Fire in Washington. As reported by Reuters, the Aug. 27 raid resulted in two firefighters being detained at an ICE detention center in Tacoma, where federal officials refused to release the firefighters' names.

The two men were employed by a company contracted by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which requested Border Patrol assistance in verifying the identities of members of the companies' work crews. The Reuters news story also cites a U.S. Customs and Border Protection statement indicating that BLM management subsequently terminated contracts with the firefighting companies.

Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) reported that one of the firefighters, 23-year-old Oregon resident Rigoberto Hernandez, was released Sept. 24 without a court oder. Attorneys had filed a habeas corpus petition demanding Hernandez's release, and federal attorneys unexpectedly filed to dismiss the case almost a month after the firefighter was illegally detained. No news outlets have reported any information about the other detained firefighter.

Jordan Cunnings, legal director for Innovation Law Lab, told OPB, "Rigoberto was arrested solely because of his race and because he asserted his constitutional rights.... That's patently unlawful.... The officers were joking about him based on his skin color ... while he was handcuffed. The whole thing just really turns your stomach."

Prior to Hernandez' release, Alex Brown, reporting for *Stateline*, revealed that nearly a dozen firefighters and officials familiar with the incident, speaking on condition of anonymity, "shared their belief that the top officials assigned to the fire deployed the crews to a remote location under false pretenses" so that federal agents could check their immigration status.

"There's really no way [the wildfire management team] could not have been involved," Riva Duncan told Brown. Duncan is a former wildland fire chief who served more than 30 years with the U.S. Forest Service. "We're all talking about it," she said. "People are wondering if they go on a fire with this team, if that could happen to them."

"This team" is California Interagency Incident Management Team 7. Brown's news report indicates that widespread anger with the team has been expressed within the wildland firefighting community.

Roadless Rule Rescission Faces Stiff Opposition

A coalition of eight states — California, Washington, Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, and Vermont* — is urging the Forest Service to drop its plan to rescind the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which protects 45 million acres of wilderness lands in our national forests from development. Critics from both sides of the aisle oppose the rescission, from scientists to environmentalists to hunters.

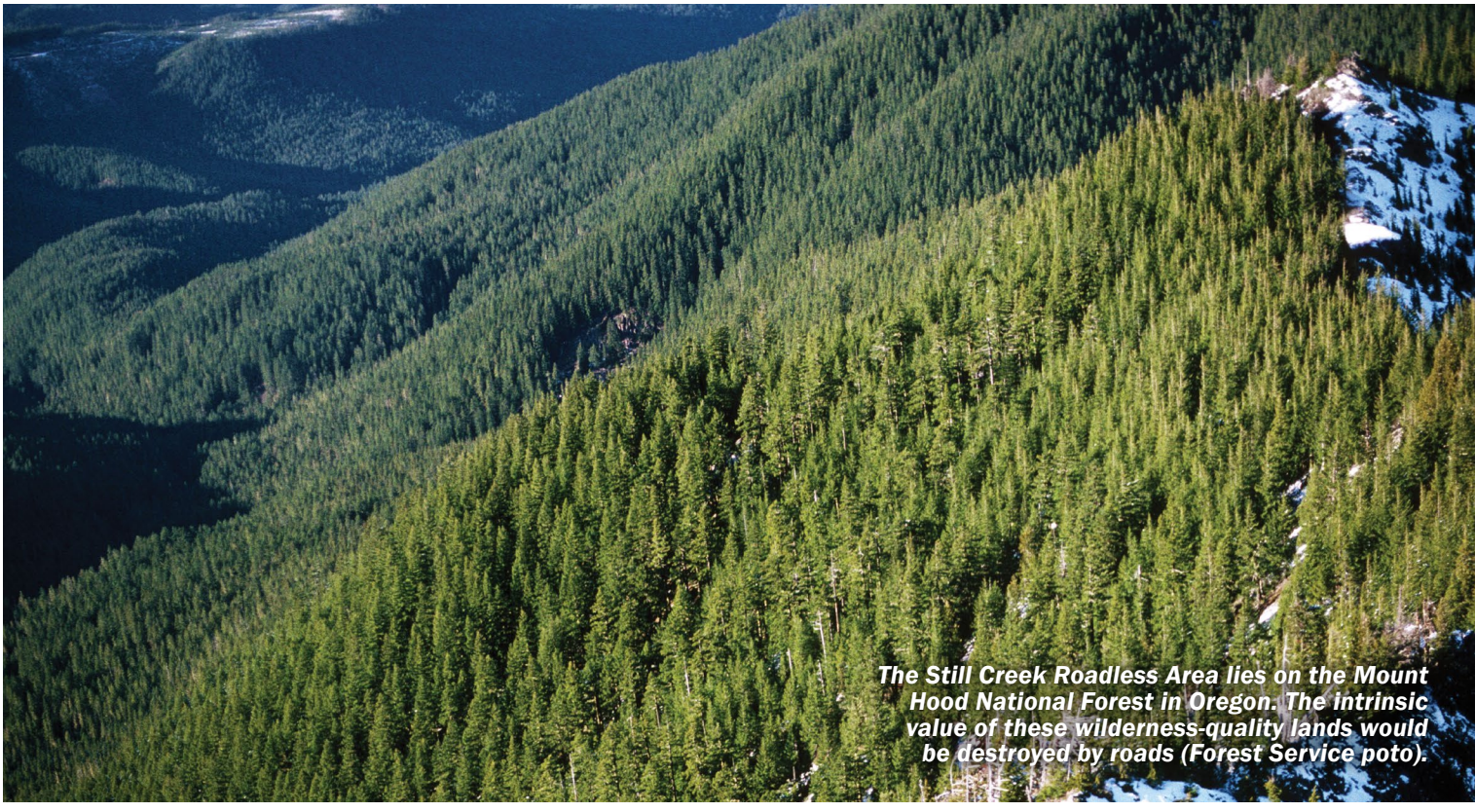
Besides harming sensitive ecosystems, rescinding the rule would increase wildfire risk and threaten local and state economies. From a practical standpoint, the most compelling argument may come from the outdoor recreation industry, which depends heavily on access to these lands and generated $1.2 trillion of economic activity in 2023.

The Forest Service is moving ahead with the repeal, despite already having a $6 billion backlog in road maintenance. More than 370,000 miles of mostly unpaved roads, many built for clear-cut logging, already crisscross our national forests, posing threats to drinking water sources, stream health, vital wetlands, and habitat for threatened and endangered species. Building more roads will only exacerbate these problems while doing nothing to address them. Already, the furthest anyone can be from a road in the lower 48 states is 22 miles. Rescinding the Roadless Rule would not only increase road construction, it would also allow logging in old-growth forests and increased mineral extraction in our precious few pristine lands — all of which would increase pollution.

Changing the Roadless Rule requires a legally defined rule-making process, and the Forest Service held an unusually brief 21-day public comment period in September. In spite of the brevity of the comment period, some 224,000 comments were submitted as well as an additional 400,000 signatures collected and submitted by conservation activists. The Center for Western Priorities analyzed the comments and found that 99% opposed repealing the Roadless Rule.

"It's hard to find anything that the American people agree with across party lines, across state lines like this," said Aaron Weiss, the deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities. "This is not a conservative-liberal thing. This is not a rural-urban thing. This is 99% of the American people saying, 'Don't do this.'"

* Colorado and Idaho developed separate roadless rules and would not be affected by current efforts to rescind the federal rule.



The Still Creek Roadless Area lies on the Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon. The intrinsic value of these wilderness-quality lands would be destroyed by roads (Forest Service poto).

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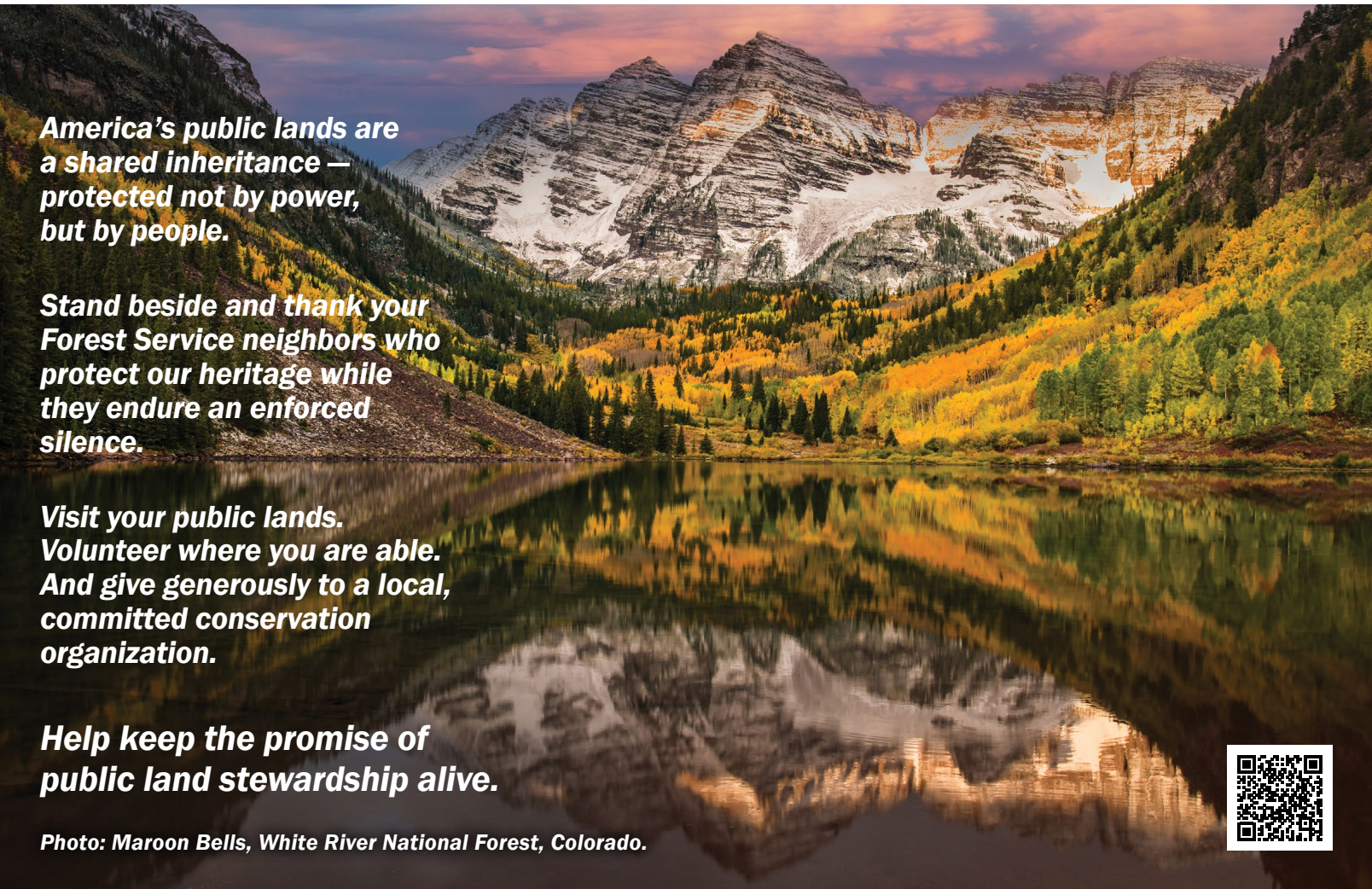

America's public lands are a shared inheritance — protected not by power, but by people.

Stand beside and thank your Forest Service neighbors who protect our heritage while they endure an enforced silence.

Visit your public lands. Volunteer where you are able. And give generously to a local, committed conservation organization.

Help keep the promise of public land stewardship alive.

Photo: Maroon Bells, White River National Forest, Colorado.