

Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative for National Forests

The problem

An oversized system of roads in Washington state's national forests -- combined with prolonged underfunding of road maintenance and reclamation -- has created a \$300 million backlog of work.

This is part of a national backlog that is now estimated to cost more than \$10 billion and the price tag is increasing each day.

Muddy water from failing and washed-out forest roads harms endangered and dwindling runs of salmon that need cold, clear water to thrive and reproduce. Muddy water harms the gills of salmon and trout. Fish eggs smother when silt settles into clean gravel beds.

Deteriorating, unmaintained and poorly designed national forest roads contribute sediment-laden runoff into streams, making them wider, shallower and more susceptible to warming by the sun. Sediments foul drinking water, increasing the need for community water filtration systems. Failing roads also threaten recreational opportunities.

In recent years, severe storms have battered the Pacific Northwest and accelerated the damage to stream habitat from already failing national forest road systems. Unless we storm-proof our forest watersheds, the price tag on fixing these sub-standard roads will continue to skyrocket.



Green jobs in the forest. Workers remove a culvert to improve water quality and salmon habitat on Le Bar Creek in the South Fork Skokomish River watershed in July 2008. Photo by The Wilderness Society

- ✳ **Failing national forest roads in Washington state threaten water quality and endangered salmon runs.**
- ✳ **Washington's \$100 million in FY2010 to repair fish culverts critical for resource recreation.**
- ✳ **This funding will create green, high-wage, high-skill jobs in rural resource-dependent communities**

These conditions occur today on thousands of miles of national forest roads in Washington state due to lack of federal investment in necessary repairs and maintenance. The situation deteriorates daily.

The Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) is delegated to implement the federal Clean Water Act. Ecology has a long-term relationship with the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) to prevent water pollution from forest management practices. Most problems are caused by muddy water and flooding.

To prevent harm to water quality and salmon, Ecology and the Forest Service signed an agreement in 2000 to develop an inventory of Forest Service roads and set a timeline to improve them sufficiently to prevent harm from pollution and excess sediment.

The Forest Service has concluded that, if the needed road work begins now, it will cost an estimated \$300 million to bring Washington's national forests into compliance with today's standards

Currently, the federal budget provides the Forest Service with only \$3 million annually to address this problem.

Prolonged under-funding has created a maintenance backlog that grows by at least \$8 million each year. This staggering backlog does not include the cost to repair roads that fail because of neglect and storm damage, and does not account for inflation.

The impassible road 26 above the Suiattle River in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The river cut into the hillside below the road leading to road failure.

The Beginning of a Solution - The Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Program

Congress first funded the national Legacy Roads and Trails and Remediation program in 2008 at \$40 million. The program addresses water problems in our national forests by decommissioning unneeded roads, and by repairing fish culverts and maintaining roads critical for resource management and recreation. In 2009, the second year of the program, Congress funded the Legacy Roads program at \$50 million and provided the impetus to fund road work in our national forests as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act). Stimulus funds will help provide high-wage, high-skill green jobs to rural, resource-dependent communities and are dedicated to "priority road, bridge and trail maintenance

and decommissioning, including related watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects..."

This is an impressive first step to restoring our forest watersheds. The next steps should include inventorying each forest's road system to determine the minimum amount of roads needed. That way, the Forest Service can prioritize road reclamation and remediation to "right-size" the overall forest road system. This will reduce the massive cost to taxpayers to continually repair environmental harm and pollution problems of this oversized system.

Federal investment pays off

Restoration jobs will put people back to work on our national forests. This work will:

- ✳ Restore needed natural infrastructure and reclaim unneeded roads.



✳️ Make forests more resilient and adaptable to the unknown consequences of climate change.

✳️ Assist the Forest Service and other federal natural resource stewards to meet basic environmental responsibilities

National forests have always been an important source of jobs in rural, resource-dependent communities, but declining timber harvests cause economic challenges for rural economies. A recent report predicts the decline in timber jobs will continue in the upcoming years as housing starts stall. Therefore, the current financial crisis will hit these communities very hard unless restoration dollars are contracted out to local economies.

Forest Service staffing has been declining for over a decade and undermining the agency's ability to implement an extensive watershed restoration program. Contracting out road remediation work to people in resource-dependent communities provides a win-win solution. It augments the Forest Services' capacity and provides high-wage, high-skill jobs similar to the ones provided in the past from building roads or extracting timber. Since these jobs require the very same heavy equipment needed to build roads, and since that machinery is expensive to transport, the jobs are most likely to go to local workers. Local workers will spend the bulk of their paychecks directly in their own communities. Furthermore, this work will encourage local contractors and workers to make long-term investments in equipment and training.

Steps to the solution

1 Increase funding in 2010 to meet the need.

Forest Service roads are a huge, neglected problem. The Forest Service estimates the cost in Washington to be \$300 million, excluding inflation, to repair damage to roads that fail. This translates into \$30 million per year for the next 10 years to cover the costs of road repair and decommissioning. But at the current rate of Legacy Roads funding (\$3 million provided to Washington in 2008), it will take 100 years to address the problem. To meet the need, we must increase Legacy Roads funding to \$100 million in Fiscal Year 2010. This admittedly large investment gives national forests in Washington a fighting chance to meet the road maintenance timeline that state and large private owners will meet – a deadline that the Forest Service committed to in 2000. Because road decommissioning projects are long-term, the federal government should make funding occur under multi-year authorizations rather than just one year at a time. Washington's administrative code sets the time frame: "All roads in the planning area must be in compliance with the current rules by July 1, 2016." (WAC 222-24-051 online at <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=222-24-051>)

2 Prioritize the work: Target projects to get the "biggest bang for the buck."

Identify priority basins within each national forest -- and priority sub-basins within these basins -- where work will begin to reduce road-related harm to water

quality. Give priority to basins and sub-basins that have:

✳️ Significant populations of threatened, endangered or sensitive aquatic species and high habitat value for conservation and recovery.

✳️ Sensitive geologies.

✳️ Opportunities to attain water quality objectives in whole watersheds with limited investment and treatment of relatively few road miles.

✳️ Complementary restoration activities, including fish passage improvement already occurring in high value watersheds or connected mainstem rivers and estuaries.

✳️ High current or planned public or commercial road use.

✳️ Opportunities to partner with other landowners, tribes, salmon recovery groups and other organizations.

Within priority areas, well-designed projects would restore and protect water quality, including maintenance of ground and surface water within their natural drainage areas. Priority projects would:

✳️ Re-route road runoff that cannot be eliminated to minimize or eliminate direct delivery of sediment to streams.

✳️ Decommission high-risk, unstable, and unneeded roads.

✳️ Replace or remove stream-crossing structures to enable unimpeded passage of fish, other aquatic life, wood and gravel.

✳️ Renovate road drainage features to minimize the need for future active maintenance and the likelihood of system failures.

3 Prioritize inventory, planning and project design work.

The Forest Service should integrate Legacy Roads funds with Recovery Act funds so that a constant flow of projects are being developed and processed. Recovery Act expenditures will deplete the Forest Service of its ready-to-go critical road maintenance and decommissioning projects. The Forest Service is not spending any of the Recovery Act funding for planning. Therefore FY10 and FY11 Legacy Roads funds should augment Recovery Act funds by focusing on roads analysis, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning, and design work to build a "pipe-line" of future projects and to better know the true cost of the problem.

4 Create green jobs.

Investing in forest watershed restoration will have tangible, long-term human and ecological benefits. Public investment in forest watershed restoration can sustain American families whose lives and work are tightly connected to our national forests. An infusion of \$100 million a year annually can create and sustain 1,400 direct jobs across the rural West, many of them in Washington state for decades into the future. These funds will have the additional effect of creating other wages and income that result from the multiplier effects of enhanced spending. We believe the Legacy Roads program must be viable for decades to come to address the backlog of maintenance needs and road decommissioning projects to restore functioning, dynamic, resilient watershed conditions on our national forests.

5 Dedicate adequate monitoring funds to the Forest Service so that it may allocate adequate resources for environmental monitoring and reporting.

Monitoring and evaluation are crucial not only to identify where roads are causing continued harm to aquatic resources but to: (1) document and guide the proper execution of projects, (2) evaluate whether the intended environmental benefits actually are being realized, and (3) ensure that projects are using successful techniques.

Monitoring and evaluation reports are critical to provide accountability for taxpayer investments, and the cost is low relative to project work. Two percent of funding for road-related projects is suggested and should be equally divided between project implementation monitoring by forest staff, and ecological and economic effectiveness monitoring by the Forest Service Research Station.

6 Provide adequate Forest Service staff to support project partnerships.

A small investment in staffing can help the Forest Service leverage outside resources to implement and monitor projects. Through partnerships with other landowners and organizations such as tribes and salmon recovery groups, the Forest Service can cooperatively fund restoration. But the Forest Service needs additional staff for design and environmental review. In the past, insufficient Forest Service staffing has deterred potential partners from working with it on project design, environmental review, and on contract compliance. Adequate staffing for partnership programs can leverage the public investment in road-based watershed restoration.

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