

# Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative for National Forests

## Legacy Roads and Trails

Congress created the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Initiative in Fiscal Year 2008 in response to concerns raised by the Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative. This initiative is led by a coalition of 18 groups in Washington State working together to address the chronic lack of investment in aging national forest roads. Sediment from these roads endangers public lands, clean water, and fish populations.

Legacy Roads funding has created an impressive watershed restoration effort in our national forests. Since 2008, \$180 million has flowed into forests across the nation for watershed restoration to address the problem from an oversized system of roads. Nationally, the first two years of this program accomplished a great deal:

- ✳ Improved 1,147 miles of fish habitat.
- ✳ Repaired 820 culverts.
- ✳ Maintained 3,089 miles of roads.
- ✳ Decommissioned 2,194 miles of roads.

The Washington Watershed Restoration Initiative strongly supports the continuation of funding for Legacy Roads and requests an additional \$120 million in Fiscal Year 2011. In addition, we request \$30 million from the Forest Service's Construction and Maintenance Account to begin the process of identifying a minimum road system.



*Inadequate funding for maintenance and recent large floods have combined to accelerate damage to both infrastructure and aquatic resources. Here, a failed stream crossing on an unneeded road delivers sediment to a stream on the Olympic National Forest, WA.*

U.S. Forest Service Photo

## ***In Washington State, the \$7.1 million Legacy Roads investment for FY 08-09:***

- ✳ ***Restored or enhanced 63 miles of fish habitat.***
- ✳ ***Improved or maintained 733 miles of roads.***
- ✳ ***Decommissioned 160 miles of road.***
- ✳ ***Improved or repaired 102 miles of trails.***



U.S. Forest Service Photo

## Right-sizing the road system

While Legacy Roads and Trails funds have earned excellent accomplishments on the ground, we need long-term planning to ensure the Forest Service will continue to spend this money effectively. We believe the agency needs to undertake a comprehensive right-sizing initiative to reduce the ecological impacts and fiscal burden of the road system.

Legacy Roads funding should be spent efficiently and effectively on roads that need it most. To do this, the Forest Service must comply with the FY09 and FY10 Interior Appropriations bill directives to complete travel management planning and identify the minimum road system as required by the 2001 Road Management Strategy Rule and Policy. We believe this work is a critical first step in defining an ecologically- and economically-sound road system and providing a coherent framework for future Legacy Roads work.

## 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 between \$8 and \$10 billion, and the price tag is increasing daily.

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.

These conditions occur today on thousands of miles of national forest roads in Washington and across the nation 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 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. 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.*

## Steps to the solution

### 1 Increase funding in 2011 to meet the need.

At the current rate of Legacy Roads funding (\$7.1 million provided to Washington in 2010), it will take 40 years to address the problem. To meet the need, we must increase Legacy Roads funding to \$120 million in FY 2011. This 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 Right size the system. Identify a minimum road system.

Defining a sustainable forest road system – ecologically and economically – in each forest is the primary step toward right-sizing the system and strategically and effectively spending Legacy Roads funding. The \$30 million in planning funds can begin this process in FY 11.

In 2001, the Forest Service estimated that its road system was oversized by approximately 20 to 35 percent. It adopted a long term roads policy requiring a systematic assessment of which roads needed storm-proofing and which ones needed to be reclaimed. This assessment – which would lay out the

road map to right the system and provide a coherent framework for future Legacy Roads expenditures – remains incomplete in about 80 percent of our national forests. A right-sized road system will facilitate access and forest management and simultaneously protect rivers and fisheries. Moreover, it will cost less in the long run to manage, which will save future taxpayers' money. Lastly, it will focus Legacy Road expenditures on priority roads, ensuring effective expenditures of funds. For these reasons, we request an additional \$30 million to start identifying the minimum road system needed in our forests and begin the rightsizing process.

### 3 Prioritize the work: Target projects to get the biggest bang for the buck.

Identify priority basins within each national forest to markedly reduce road-related harm to water quality. Give priority to basins and watersheds 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 happening 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 into streams.
- ✳ Decommission roads that are high-risk, unstable, and economically unsustainable.
- ✳ Replace or remove stream-crossing structures to improve passage of fish, other aquatic life, wood and gravel.
- ✳ Renovate road drainage features to decrease future maintenance and prevent future system failures.

### 4 Create green, local, family-wage jobs.

Jobs restoring national forest roads put people back to work. National forests have always been an important source of jobs in rural and tribal, resource-dependent communities, but declining timber harvests cause economic challenges for rural economies. A recent report predicts the decline in timber jobs will continue as housing starts stall. The current financial crisis will hit these communities hard unless we contract restoration dollars out to local economies. An infusion of \$120 million a year annually can create and sustain 1,700 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.

## 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 also to:

- ✳ Document and guide the proper execution of projects.
- ✳ Evaluate if we are realizing intended environmental benefits.
- ✳ Ensure projects are using successful techniques.

Monitoring and evaluation provides accountability for taxpayer investments. The cost is low relative to project work. We suggest using two percent of this funding for monitoring and evaluation of road-related projects. Equally divide this funding between project implementation monitoring by forest staff, and ecological and economic effectiveness monitoring by a 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 contract compliance. Adequate staffing for partnership programs can leverage the public investment in road-based watershed restoration.

*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



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