

How PNTA Leadership on the Colville National Forest Could Become a Model for the Trails Stewardship Act

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A fallen tree on Abercrombie Mountain in the Colville NF

Meeting the Challenge of Maintaining the PNT

Maintaining a 1,200 mile National Scenic Trail year after year is truly an epic task. Located high in the rugged mountains which guard our Northern border, much of the Pacific Northwest Trail remains snowbound until summer, leaving a short season to work with. After four months of milder temps, the weather window slams shut again and the cycle begins anew.

“Limited funding, compounded by the rising cost of wildfire operations, has resulted in less than 25% of Forest Service trails meeting all of the agency’s standards for safety...”

The responsibility for managing this flurry of summertime activity falls on the Pacific Northwest Trail Association’s Director of Trail Operations, Lewis Trout, whose steady management style was cold forged over a 21 year career in the US Army Infantry. For over a decade, Trout’s mission has remained the same - to prevent hard-earned tread built in previous years from being reclaimed by nature. Spring snow melt becomes an erosive force that can rearrange mountain landscapes as well as tread; and fast growing, woody brush, like alder, seizes the short growing season in a landgrab for sunlight left available by the trail corridor.

Most pressingly, winter’s harsh storms fell thousands of trees which must be “logged out” or cleared before other trail work can begin. Performed by experienced sawyers, log out is often the most time consuming portion of trail work, particularly in designated wilderness, where hand tools must be used, requiring up to half of a crew’s time in the field.

With this first arduous step complete, the rest of Trout’s logistical maneuvers unfold across the remainder of the eight week season. Tapping local

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youth and Job Corps students, his carefully planned, multi-week tours of backcountry work parties, target trail across three states and seven mountain ranges, directing his crews as they frenetically perform the rest of their labors, working alongside volunteers, before the short season comes to a close again.

WITH LESS FUNDING, HOW WILL TRAILS STAY OPEN?

Forest Service lands make up roughly half of the PNT’s trail corridor. Even if you haven’t read about the study conducted by the Government Accountability Office which showed a \$314 million maintenance backlog in U.S. Forest Service trails in 2013, PNT users may have experienced it first hand. They may have also noticed a dramatic increase in outdoor enthusiasts they share our public lands with.

In a recent press release, the Forest Service explained the effects that limited funding has on their work, despite the contributions of volunteers.

The USFS, “receives widespread support from tens of thousands of volunteers and partners each year who, in 2015, contributed nearly 1.4 million hours – a value of about \$31.6 million – in maintenance and repair of nearly 30,000 miles of trails,” said Stephen Baker, Media Relations, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region. “However, limited funding, compounded by the rising cost of wildfire operations, has resulted in less than 25 percent of Forest Service trails meeting all of the agency’s standards for safety, quality recreation and economic and environmental sustainability.”

With over three quarters of the trails in the Pacific Northwest below USFS standards, a growing maintenance backlog presents a serious test of member-supported trail associations.

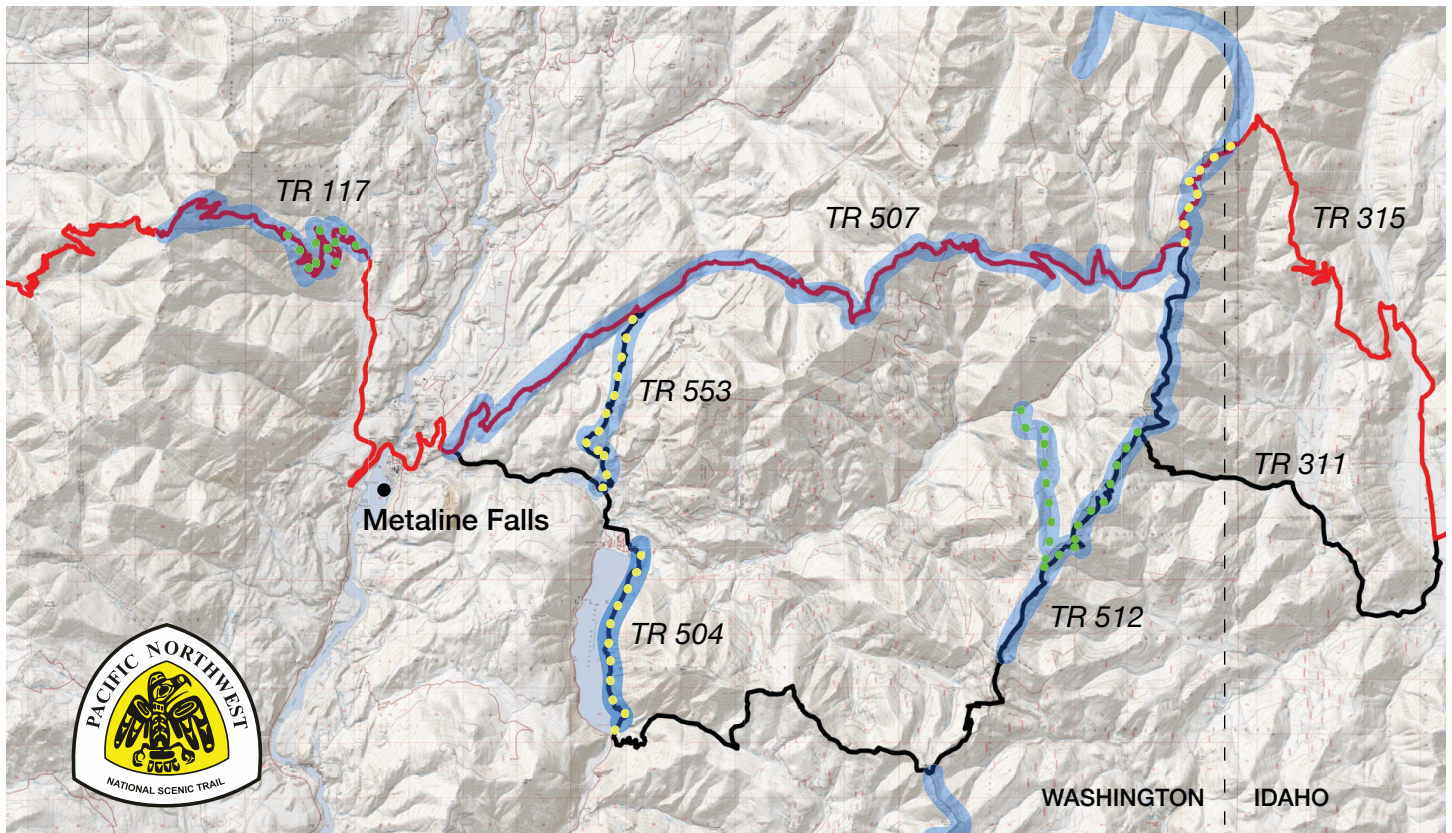


The Sullivan Lake Ranger District manages a portion of the 1.1 Million Acre, Colville National Forest

RESOURCE CHALLENGES IN THE COLVILLE NF

The PNTA maintains tread all along its 1,200 mile path, but we don’t do it alone. In 2016, several volunteer groups including the Student Conservation Association (SCA), Back Country Horsemen (BCHA), Washington Trails Association (WTA), and the PNTA, all marshalled their resources to address the maintenance backlog in Eastern Washington and revive the PNT there, near the trail town of Metaline Falls.

These four groups had all planned projects in the Sullivan Lake Ranger District of the 1.1 million acre Colville National Forest, but the Forest lacked internal capacity to manage the project. Although the situation was not unique to the Colville, the challenge they faced remained.



Without the experienced leadership of the Forest Service, how would the four separate trail associations identify where to work or how to coordinate their efforts to function as a cohesive unit?

While recent budget cuts directly impact the USFS, indirect effects include the potential to seriously impair the efficiency of volunteer crews. Given the cooperative nature of trail work and the unique specialization of the associations involved, the chain of events potentially set off by a vacuum of leadership is significant. Consider that until log-out is complete, the Back Country Horsemen's packers can't access the backcountry. Without assistance with supplies delivered by the BCHA, trail crews may accomplish less and volunteers could be left without direction. In this scenario, trails can fall into disrepair. As a consequence, our quality of experience can suffer and in a worst-case scenario, some trails may be closed indefinitely.

HOW THE COLVILLE MODEL SUGGESTS A WAY FORWARD

Users of the Colville National Forest's trails in 2016 may not have noticed the inventive solution which saved the PNT there. Were it not for the initiative and leadership of the PNTA's Director of Trail Operations, Lewis Trout, and the oversight provided by Craig Newman, Colville National Forest Staff Officer, trails in the Colville would have continued to deteriorate. Some, like the Red Bluff Trail (553), could have remained closed indefinitely.

"Since funding for trails has been severely reduced over the past several years, and there's no indication of future increases, the Forest Service and other trail stewards are finding ways to better leverage scarce funding," explained Newman. "The partnerships that have developed to address the trail maintenance needs on the Colville National Forest are good examples of [this]. Where we've fallen short on funding, we've made up for it in partnership and volunteer resources."

“With the PNTA providing their leadership and oversight, multiple partners work closely together as a cohesive collaborative to cooperatively manage our trails system.”

While the Forest Service works with a variety of trail maintenance organizations, their long standing relationship with the PNTA is guided by a comprehensive partnership agreement developed not long after the PNT was designated as a National Scenic Trail in 2009. This agreement shapes a powerful partnership through which the PNTA works with the Forest Service on cooperative management and administration of the trail. This cooperation extends across the 1,200 miles of the PNT and at many levels: from trail maintenance to volunteer management to youth education. Traditionally, PNTA would work on trails with local Forest Service staff providing project oversight and support, but 2016 brought new challenges that required new solutions to overcome.

Under new funding realities, the expansion of responsibilities granted to the PNTA by the Forest Service, arose out of practical necessity, and Trout assumed a new role in the 2016 season within the multi-tiered partnership, providing support not just to his own crews, but also for volunteer coordination. Ultimately, Trout managed the efforts of all four organizations for the course of the season.

Each of the four trail associations involved was positioned to employ its unique skillset in service to our public lands. Not only do these groups bring a diverse body of volunteers to pulaski-ready projects, they work to fulfill larger missions like supporting at-risk youth or mentoring the next generation of conservationists.

“With the PNTA providing their leadership and oversight, multiple partners work closely together as a cohesive collaborative to cooperatively manage our trails system,” Newman said. “Having a lead partner responsible for the management and

maintenance of our trails will... ensure accessible, safe trails for locals and visitors alike.”

The collaboration between the PNTA and the Colville National Forest offers an encouraging example of the success that innovative, public-private partnerships can have in feeding the increasing appetite for outdoor recreation in the midst of an extended period of budget-cutting measures from Congress.

By working together, the four trail associations achieved more, completing nearly all of the trail maintenance in the Sullivan Lake Ranger District in 2016. They helped to reduce Forest Service maintenance backlogs and to provide a better outdoor recreation experience on five popular trails which form part of the PNT in Eastern Washington. All told, volunteers gave 2,806 hours to the effort.



The Back Country Horsemen of Washington Helped Pack Tools to a Team of Ten WTA Volunteers on the Red Bluff Trail

“We like to see trail workers arrive at their worksite full of energy, not exhausted from hauling tools and supplies. That's what our stock are for.”

COLLABORATION WITH THE BACK COUNTRY HORSEMEN OF WASHINGTON

In the backcountry, pack stock is often the only practical way to supply crews with needed supplies and heavy tools. In designated wilderness, mechanized equipment is not permitted and stock still reign. Most of us may not be able to tell the difference between a decker-manty setup and a classic sawbuck-pannier, but recognizing the outsized role that the BCHA plays in maintaining our outdoor infrastructure doesn't take knowledge of Western packing styles, just common sense.

"We like to see trail workers arrive at their worksite full of energy, not exhausted from hauling their tools and supplies. That's what our stock are for," said Darrell Wallace, Executive Director of BCHW. Today, the term horsepower may invite thoughts of piston-powered Detroit muscle, but it derives from the output of draft horses. In this case, with one horse being roughly equal to the hard labor of a dozen backpackers.

Over the season, the Back Country Horsemen of Washington played a critical role in the work



SCA Volunteers, Seori Stephens (Left) and Esmeralda Mendoza (Right) On The Shedroof Trail

completed on the Thunder Creek Trail #526. Twenty BCHA volunteers, led by volunteer packers Darrell Wallace, Bruce Foreman, Vicki Gish, Bob Williams, and Stuart Nieman together donated an impressive 28 pack stock days and 67 riding stock days to pack-in our crews. In turn, the PNTA lent them assistance with an upcoming BCHA turnpike-building project on the and Shedroof Divide Trail.

"I have seen [our volunteers] rise well before dawn, gulp some oatmeal and a cup of coffee, load their horses in the trailer, and drive for hours – to a work party! There, they will load tools on their animals and wade through cold, deep, water; over steep hills, and along steep cliffs to get to the work that they will do. They will even suffer through paper-work (gasp!), endure the worst weather nature can throw at them, and laugh off the aches and pains that inevitably come with their labors. And all without pay. Many times, it's at their expense," observed Wallace in the May/June 2016 issue of the Trailhead News.

“Though I got blisters on my feet, I pushed myself to do the best work possible, knowing that generations would be able to enjoy these National Forests the way I have”

TEACHING TRAIL SKILLS TO THE STUDENT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

During the course of the summer, the PNTA crew worked with and supported an SCA crew of eight students, which spent 14 long, wet days in the backcountry rehabilitating tread and logging out the Thunder Creek #526, Shedroof Divide Trail #512 and Abercrombie Trail #117. In total, SCA's dedicated volunteers removed over 121 downed trees from these popular trails.

The Student Conservation Association works with high school and college age students, to build the next generation of conservation leaders by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land. By bringing younger Americans to far flung work sites, often far removed from their home towns, the SCA creates unforgettable experiences and inspiring opportunities.

To prepare them for log-out work, PNTA crew leads Cody Pohren and Forest Reeves instructed SCA students on the art of the two-person crosscut saw, known as a “misery whip” for the physical demands it requires of a sawyer. To comply with wilderness regulations, crosscut saws are required, and crews must learn to master both hand tools and time-saving machines.

“I thought I was too weak to hike ten to twelve miles each day while carrying tools and a pack, ” said Esmeralda Mendoza, a quiet teen from Chicago. “Though I got blisters on my feet, I pushed myself to do the best work possible, knowing that generations would be able to enjoy these National Forests the way I have... [This] has made me a better and stronger person.”

While taking a break from trail work and nearly two weeks of incessant rain, Esmeralda and her crew were treated to a presentation on natural resource careers and the remarkable animals which inhabit the Colville, by Forest Service Wildlife Biologist, Mike Borysewicz. Although they may not have encountered a grizzly bear, woodland caribou, or gray wolf during their trip, Borysewicz helped them to better appreciate that their backcountry campsites were deep in the habitats of these rare creatures.

United by their common task, and after enduring nearly two weeks of Pacific Northwest rains together, SCA Crew Leads, Scott Goldstein and Willa Fouts, thanked Lewis Trout for, “providing all the organization behind the scenes for a well-run trail crew.” But the two organizations had succeeded at more than trail maintenance. Their partnership provided life-changing trips for Esmeralda and her crew and by working together, their efforts helped to ensure that future generations can have these kinds of experiences on the Pacific Northwest Trail.



Cameron Walton has worked on the PNTA's Log Out Crew for two seasons

PROVIDING JOB CORPS STUDENTS WITH WORK EXPERIENCE

Later in the season, Crew Lead Cody Pohren managed three separate PNTA trail crews made up of Job Corps students from Curlew, Washington, a small town of just over a 100 souls, just outside of the Colville National Forest on the Kettle River.

For 13 seasons, the PNTA has successfully partnered with Job Corps, a no-cost education and vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor. Job Corps works nationwide with at-risk youth, ages 16 through 24, to improve the quality of their lives by preparing them for future careers through academic and vocational training, like trail work.

During the first trip, Pohren's crew revitalized the Red Bluff Trail (553). Their labors included brushing, tread work, and installing kiosks at the trailhead on Abercrombie mountain, a popular hiking spot in the Selkirk Mountains of the Colville National Forest.

“The Trails Stewardship Act seeks to increase the amount of trail maintenance performed by volunteers by 100% by 2021.”

During the final trip, crews poured two concrete slabs along the north shore of the ADA certified, Sullivan Lake Trail (504) for benches that will be installed in 2017. Pohren’s crew also installed posts and did 870 feet of tread-work on the Silver Creek Trail.

“I think it’s great that we can find these kinds of projects to help the Job Corps students with their work-based learning and help them have a better understanding of what is in the forest and how they may enjoy interacting with nature,” said the Pacific Northwest Trail Association’s Director of Trail Operations, Lewis Trout.



The North Fork Bridge Caused the Closure of the Red Bluff TR

WORKING WITH THE WASHINGTON TRAILS ASSOCIATION

With a truly impressive ability to mobilize trail stewards in Washington, the Washington Trails Association is the nation's largest state-based

hiking nonprofit organization. The WTA protects Washington’s hiking trails and wildlands, takes volunteers out to maintain trails, and promotes hiking as a healthy, fun way to explore the outdoors.

Holly Weiler, the WTA’s Eastern Washington Regional Coordinator, led ten WTA volunteers to complete work on the Thunder Creek Trail #526 and Shedroof Divide Trail #512. With the support of PNTA crews and the Back Country Horsemen of Washington, local volunteers were able to restore these popular trails.

Washington Trails Association and PNTA crews also teamed up to work on the Red Bluff Trail (553) on a second backcountry trip. PNTA crews disassembled and logged out a bypass around a derelict 82 foot bridge, while WTA volunteers spent four days working to remove the hazardous structure, which caused the official closure of the trail.

After working on the Red Bluff Trail last year, Weiler’s crews returned the following season to help reopen the trail. “Once this project is complete, access will be restored to Crowell Ridge. There are two other trailheads that access Crowell Ridge, but both are only accessible via several miles of very rough [Forest Service] road,” Weiler said. “Red Bluff to North Fork is just off the pavement, which means hikers in small passenger cars can get there with ease and experience greater diversity in the ecosystems they hike through. Portions of this trail make for excellent day hikes, but once the bridge is complete, there [will also be] excellent backpacking opportunities along this route.”

If the PNT is to remain open and safe, a new generation of trail lovers will need to discover the satisfaction of becoming trail stewards.

How the Success of the Trails Stewardship Act Depends on You



Abercrombie Mountain, in the Colville National Forest, offers PNT'ers views, day trips & overnight backpacking opportunities

The PNT owes its very existence to the grit of grass-roots maintainers, like the PNTA, who dedicated themselves to make Ron Strickland's dream of a crown-to-coast National Scenic Trail a reality.

But if the PNT is to remain open and safe, a new generation of trail lovers will need to discover the deep satisfaction to be found by joining a trail community and becoming stewards of trails on our public lands.

Late last year, Congress signed the National Forest System Trails Stewardship Act, H.R. 845 and S.1110, into law. Created to help address the growing maintenance backlog caused by a lack of funding for trails at the USFS, the Trails Stewardship Act seeks to increase the amount of trail maintenance performed by volunteers by 100% by 2021. **This will effectively increase the burden placed on member supported nonprofits, like the PNTA.**

With the ongoing challenges of preserving the 1,200 mile PNT, as well as the 23,000 miles of other trails in the Northwest, our nation's trail maintenance organizations will need to tap into new pools of volunteer labor, and revenue, to assume new outsized roles in keeping our trails open and safe under the Trails Stewardship Act.

If you love our nation's trails and want to ensure access for future generations of Americans, there is no better time than now to give back and get involved by becoming a member of the Pacific Northwest Trail Association.

