

# THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE RECREATION

*Inyo National Forest will serve as a proving ground for new U.S. Forest Service management strategy*

By Rea

Over sixty people showed up on Saturday, June 4 to volunteer for the Trail Days 2016 Kick-Off event at Panorama Dome in Mammoth's Lakes Basin, providing an example of what could be the future of trails on Forest Service land. Saturday's Mammoth Lakes Trail System event was funded by Measure R dollars in a partnership between the Town of Mammoth Lakes and the Inyo National Forest. Volunteers were treated to food provided by New York Deli & Bagel Co. and Sunrise Rotary, as well as a raffle at the end of their work day with items donated by a myriad of sponsors including Friends of the Inyo and Footloose Sports.

"This is what sustainable recreation looks like," John Wentworth, CEO of Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation (MLTPA), told The Sheet on Saturday morning.

"Sustainable recreation" is a term that people who recreate in the National Forest system should familiarize themselves with, Wentworth told The Sheet.

First put forward by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in 2010 as "A Framework for Sustainable Recreation," the simple 8-page document emphasizes the importance of recreation in National Forests but makes note of the challenges facing infrastructure on USFS land—namely, a lack of funding, stretched resources and increased usage.

"The condition of our recreation and heritage assets has steadily diminished, resulting in a ballooning backlog of maintenance needs for recreation facilities, trails and roads," it reads.

"This was a testament from the Forest Service that they do not have the resources they need to do it by themselves...this is a very big deal internally in the Forest Service," said Wentworth.

He said said that "gateway communities" to Forest Service land are in position to shape management policies.

"Mammoth Lakes is on the cutting edge of this," Wentworth said. "Communities [like Mammoth] are dependent upon public lands for their economies... The Forest Service his-



PHOTO COURTESY TOWN OF MAMMOTH LAKES

Kim Anaclerio of Mammoth installs new signage on the Panorama Dome trail in the Lakes Basin. Volunteers like Anaclerio may be the future of recreation in the U.S.

torically has been about extraction. Now with the reorientation of the Forest Service to human beings, we really need to get the public invested in public lands."

Even as America becomes more urbanized, Americans are spending an unprecedented amount on recreation.

A document produced by the trade group Outdoor Industry Association called outdoor recreation "an overlooked economic giant." They found

that Americans spend \$646 billion annually on recreating—more than on pharmaceuticals, fuels, or motor vehicles.

In a momentous statement in April, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell announced that the Department of the Interior would work with the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) to author a study, the first of its kind, to measure the impact that outdoor recreation has on the U.S. economy.

"Hunting, boating, hiking...and other outdoor activities are so closely tied to the health and accessibility of our public lands, yet this sector has, for too long, been overlooked and undervalued," said Jewell in her speech on April 19.

It's seen as a return to the ideas espoused by "original conservationists" like Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, who saw the preservation of public lands as a reward in its own right.

U.S. Forest Service employee Arthur Carhart once famously said, "The rebuilding of the body and spirit is the greatest service derivable from our forests," and current USFS Chief Tom Tidwell quoted Carhart in his introduction to the Framework for Sustainable Recreation.

"In 2009, outdoor recreation in the National Forest system generated \$14.5 billion in economic activity," said Tidwell, which was "almost half of [the Forest Service's] entire contribution to the economy."

Unfortunately, the Forest Service does not have the funding to keep up with the demand, and with the aforementioned "backlog" of maintenance projects comes a litany of spiraling problems.

"This is really a cry for help," said Wentworth of the Framework. "This is all part of a much bigger narrative" that requires private sector involvement to deliver services. Non-governmental agencies (local examples include such disparate entities as the Mono Lake Committee, Eastern Sierra Avalanche Center and Eastern Sierra Four Wheel Drive Club) will likely be the ones to fill the void.

To this end, the Inyo National Forest is the first of eighteen "early adopters" of the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule, "The intent [of which] is to allow the Forest Service to adapt management to changing conditions and encourage more frequent amendments based on new information and monitoring," a summary states.

This includes strengthening the role of public involvement. "This is the first time in 28 years that the Inyo has revised their plan.. significant things have changed," said Danna Stroud, part of the Eastern Sierra Recreation Collaborative planning team. The last time the USFS released a Land and Resource Management Plan for the Inyo was in 1988.

"When you start thinking about a forest like the Inyo, there are activities we didn't even know existed in the '88 plan that are now being sought on this forest," said INF Public Relations Officer Deb Schweizer. "We weren't a climbing or bouldering mecca in '88, and we are now."

"So much has changed that now is the time for these gateway communities to look at the next 20 years and what needs to be included in this plan," said Stroud. "Revisions that al-



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If there's free watermelon, we're in. Tyndall Dodds, 5, and Jade Peterson, 6, were some of the youngest volunteers at the Trail Days event on Saturday, June 4.

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see RECREATION, page 13



RECREATION

continued from page 12

low the National Forests and Gateway Communities to be nimble enough to respond do the changes ahead.”

The Sierra and Sequoia National Forests join the Inyo as the “early adopters” in California. These forests will serve as proving grounds for the new plan.

“We’re the canary in the coal mine, we’re first,” said Wentworth of the Planning Rule. The rule’s 1600-page draft plan was released on May 24 and is currently in public comment period, said Schweizer.

Events like Saturday’s may become the future of the Forest Service’s management of public lands, funded by taxpayer money earmarked specifically for such projects. “This is Measure R dollars at work,” Wentworth told The Sheet. The Mammoth Lakes Recreation, Trails and Parks Investment Initiative was approved by Mammoth voters in 2008, and is a fund derived from a one-half percent transactions tax specifically for recreation, managed by the Town of Mammoth Lakes.

Measure R funds paid for signs that meet Forest Service specifications, for Friends of the Inyo employees who instructed volunteers on Saturday, as well as outreach for the event. “It’s appropriated funds, taxpayer money, whether it comes from the Feds, County, Town, what difference does it

make?” asked Wentworth.

There are justifiable concerns about just how “sustainable” a future that depends on public involvement can be. Mammoth Lakes is a community utterly enmeshed in recreation (“Recreation is in our marrow,” says Wentworth) and populated by people willing to volunteer their time, but not all gateway communities are as tied to recreation as Mammoth.

“I’m thinking about the other two forests [the Sierra and Sequoia] who have some very underserved and poorer communities, and I think that’s a very valid concern,” said Schweizer when asked whether such communities could bolster the USFS as well as Mammoth.

Both Wentworth and Stroud pointed out communities like Susanville and Downieville as examples of the model’s success—both had depended on National Forest land logging and suffered economically after its decline. Both communities are now finding revitalization as mountain biking destinations.

“It’s all scalable,” said Stroud. “It’s based on what your resources are. Just because you may not be a second homeowner haven like Mammoth Lakes doesn’t mean you don’t have your own assets that you can build on.”

When asked by The Sheet if the



PHOTO COURTESY TOWN OF MAMMOTH LAKES

A large turnout for projects is a hallmark of the communities surrounding the Inyo National Forest, and non-governmental organizations play a key role in outreach. The coming decades will tell if the model is truly sustainable.

USFS was being “let off the hook” from its responsibilities to maintain infrastructure, Schweizer said that the realities of budgeting simply cannot cover the demand from users.

“I think the reality is...our trail budget is probably a tenth of what it was at its peak,” said Schweizer. “So after a point... I think certain people say, if it’s important to us because that’s how we recreate, and if it’s important

to our economy, people start looking for creative solutions.”

“Just from a population perspective the demand and the use [of National Forests has] climbed significantly,” said Stroud. “And what hasn’t increased is the funding and staffing levels of the Forest Service to maintain the human part of the National Forest experience.”

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