



From the Director's Desk: Staff Cuts Get Prickly Locally for Smokey

Photos by Jon Stavney

Arbitrary cuts directed at a national level cancel years of cooperation between the White River National Forest and local governments, by firing employees local governments have ponied up to fund over the last decade. The way the cuts were delivered to staff reveal that cuts are not about "efficiency" or "cutting fraud or waste."

Cutting ["roughly 10 percent of the agencies workforce, could hobble the Forest Service, which is already struggling to remove vegetation across its vast land holdings at a pace that matches the growing threat from fires"](#) according to the New York Times. While USFS

employees are barred from speaking to the media about what is going on (what happened to transparency?), they can speak with their partners such as NWCCOG and the local jurisdictions who funded those employees for the past 6 years. Most local governments in the rural resort region adjacent to the White River National Forest are in that category and have hundreds of thousands of dollars of receipts to prove it.

The actions here are part of a broader effort nationally. The Aspen Daily News led the news cycle reporting that [13 probationary employees](#) at the Aspen Ranger District of the White River National Forest, a "handful," were terminated with a letter stating "the agency finds, [based on your performance](#), that you have not demonstrated that your further employment at the agency would be in the public interest." One of those interviewed who was fired said that he had been hired as a "permanent seasonal employee" guaranteed at least 6 months of work annually. Those fired appear to be USFS workers protecting structures by [fire prevention](#) (not firefighters were cut according to Politico) or charged with such tasks as managing rampant visitation or [removing human waste](#) left by visitors. These are physically and mentally demanding jobs. Many positions are not easily understood by title and have overlapping roles. Consider this [fired biologist](#) who, "in his role as a Compliance officer the ensured all USFS actions in Los Padres



NF followed the law, and used the necessary steps to reduce harm to the forest ecosystem" and notably supported "the agency's work to fight fires" in the WUWI zones.

According to internal sources, the "White River (National Forest) fired fifteen employees, all but one were GS 5-6, field level people, 5 of which have been funded by county or state funds, as well as one GS – 11 project manager," and stated that the cuts are "far from over" with plans communicated from Washington D.C. indicating another 25% reduction in force (NWCCOG). With 11 national forests in Colorado, those numbers align with the list acquired by the [Colorado Sun of 100 forest service employees fired](#) across the state. USFS staff cuts are stated to be 3,400 cut across the country, and the [Post Independent reports](#) that many are speaking out about **increased risk of wildfires** and impacts to the state economy from visitation data that finds national forests have a ["Huge ROI" producing over \\$400,000 of economic activity per USFS employee](#). The Washington Post is reporting that cuts at Grand Canyon have already [doubled the wait time for vehicles entering the park](#), which does not bode well for the visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park that boost the economy in Grand County.

Pause for a moment to absorb the ["broad assault on the 141-year-old civil service program"](#) that was designed to cultivate a dedicated and professional workforce separated from the whims of politics. In this case, without consulting Congress which has allocated dollars for these workers, and according to the [Constitution has the power of the purse](#) (Article I), the Executive Branch sought zero actual feedback from boots-on-the-ground or at any level regarding actual employee performance (which is available), did not in any way assess what jobs "were in the public interest," or assess which jobs or programs were ["more efficient and effective"](#) when executing what some USFS employees are calling "the Valentines Massacre." Colorado's Congressional delegation issued a [letter](#) that day. The intent of the sledgehammering cuts seems to [harass and insult](#) and [demoralize federal workers with "psychological warfare"](#) (NBC). Impacts on communities in the NWCCOG region surrounded by national forests and in Grand County's abutting National Park were not top of mind the first month of this administration, White River National Forest (WRNF) is the most visited forest in the system, with 10 to 12 million visitors. As an international destination ski area, it pays hefty leases to the federal treasury. The WRNF has been understaffed for years. With support from NWCCOG, the Colorado Association of Ski Towns (CAST) and most of the counties and towns in our region, Senator Bennet's office has worked for years to pass the Ski Area Fee Retention Act, which would allow a small portion of those funds earned from skier fees to stay with the forest to facilitate the backlog of permitting for ski area projects and fund Front Country Ranger programs. Instead, those funds will continue to go directly to the federal general fund, while local ranger districts try to operate with a skeleton crew.

Back in 2018, when the WRNF was at [14% of funding](#) from a decade prior in 2008, local governments in Eagle, Pitkin, and Summit Counties pitched in \$240,000 (which they have done at some similar level each year since) to hire and retain the very seasonal and probationary employees that were just fired. Front Country Ranger staff, workers in [Green and Khaki](#), put out abandoned campfires, shoo away those who squat as a form of affordable housing, and have picked up 3 [tons of human waste](#) and garbage in 2022 alone in the WRNF. They collaborate with local communities to manage over-run trailheads such as Hanging Lake, Maroon Bells and Booth Creek. One of the 4 Districts in the WRNF, the [Dillon Ranger District, has seen an 80% increase in non-skier recreation from 2017 to 2022, making Summit County alone the most visited national forest with an estimate 8.4 million](#) visitors.

NWCCOG along with local governments have lobbied to bolster these positions since 2018 through [letters](#) to Congressional Delegations that began when the delegation was Tipton, and also include Gardner, Polis and Bennet. Every year since, towns adjacent to the most visited forest in the USFS system have paid out of local taxpayer funds to subsidize the federal agency totaling well over 1 million dollars. We have advocated for years that these forests are national assets with benefits but also have significant impacts on adjacent towns and counties. These recent actions, combined with all the money and coordination locally between the forest and communities, is an insult to good governance. Apparently, instead of local taxpayer dollars subsidizing one of America's Best Ideas, a legacy dating back to 1891 when Benjamin Harrison set aside the White River Plateau Timberland Preserve, back when Theodore Roosevelt used to stay at the Hotel Colorado in Glenwood Springs to hunt bears on land that would later become the WRNF, that legacy of managing our public lands for multiple uses is just "not in the public interest" either.

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Upcoming Board Meetings

Thursday, March 20, 2025 – Gypsum Conference Room, Energy Program Warehouse

Full Council & EDD Board Meeting, Training Center Tour afterwards

Primary Agenda Items: Approve January meeting minutes, program overviews, distribute electronic version of Member Handbook, approve Policy updates; EDD Board meeting

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