

Wag Tales

SPRING 2024



Katherine (Katie) Armstrong, Director
Wilderness, Wild & Scenic Rivers- USFS Washington Office,
visiting Chimney Rock National Monument, San Juan NF.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE:

I am proud to introduce the 2024 edition of the Chief's Wilderness Advisory Group newsletter, WAG Tales. Over the last few years, we have seen positive developments for the Forest Service Wilderness Program: we have benefited from a one-time addition of \$2.5 million in funding for Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) and Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) work in FY23; opened a dialogue about ways to implement the Forest Service Tribal Action Plan; strengthened and led interagency efforts in WCM while continuing to improve WSP; and added energy to a more inclusive wilderness community with an increased focus on indigenous perspectives.

2024 is a big year for Wilderness, as it marks both the 60th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act and the 100th Anniversary of the first wilderness area, located on the Gila National Forest. The 12th World Wilderness Congress (Wild12) will be held in the United States, this August, in the Black Hills. And we are focusing attention on the role of fire in wilderness areas, as our climate changes.

This year's WAG Tales highlights the motivation and commitment that our employees and partners bring to stewarding a National Wilderness Preservation System for the whole people!

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RANGER TO RANGER

A cornerstone of many Forest Service wilderness & recreation campaigns has been to build strong partnerships and foster a well-trained dedicated volunteer base. Most notably, the 2016 Trail Stewardship Act called for, “a strategy to significantly increase the role of volunteers and partners in trail maintenance.” Noting that:

“Volunteers, partners, and outfitters and guides play an important role in maintaining National Forest System trails, and a comprehensive strategy is needed to ensure that volunteers and partners are used as effectively as possible.”

Eight years later that statement and those expectations still hold true. So, how does working with partners and volunteers play out in the real world for our agency’s field-going wilderness personnel? Wilderness Rangers’ work ethic is often an excellent representation of Forest Service core values – Service, Interdependence, Conservation, Diversity, and Safety. The diversity in their everyday work tasks require them to know a little about every single resource area within the Forest Service. Who better to lead the volunteer and partnership charge?

These questions led the Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG) to gather a panel of new and seasoned wilderness rangers from all regions of the Forest Service and asked them specifically about their experience with partners and volunteers:

What percentage of your job is focused on wilderness stewardship duties?

Our panel of Wilderness Rangers all spend a majority of their work time in wilderness, proving they were the right candidates for this interview, as they were all clearly “boots on the ground” employees. Their wilderness work is not a collateral duty, although the amount of time they spend within the wilderness does change seasonally throughout the year. Hayley Lindsey, Wilderness Manager on the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF states: *“I like the idea of quantifying it by season. In an ideal world I spend 80% of my time in summer and maybe a little less in winter, if I count wilderness boundary patrols.”*

What training would you find helpful to further your career goals?

Our panel identified a wide range of answers for this question. They identified LNT, Carhart Wilderness Basics, GIS, Forest Protection Officer (FPO), stock packing, visitor interactions, trail work, and data analysis training as important. And while they noted sessions they were interested in taking, they also expressed the desire for consistent and sufficient training for their new employees and volunteers.

William Nelson, Lead Wilderness Ranger, on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest stated, *"FPO training is essential, but is now a large time commitment with the ticket quota and the LIERS system entry and login requirements."*

Alyssa Macuiba, Lead Wilderness Ranger on the Shawnee National Forest, shared, *"I find it difficult to dive into old data and to understand how it was collected, I hope that I'm doing it (data collection) in the same way, so I'm not skewing any data"*.

"When I get tasked with TRACS surveys (Trail Assessment and Condition Surveys) that just means I have to carry a tablet around and figure out how to use it, rather than carry a tool around and accomplish more tangible work. Developing those GIS skills would be great for me", said Rachel Crump, Wilderness / Trails Lead on the Custer-Gallatin National Forest.

How often do you work with partners or volunteers in your current job?

WSP reporting indicates that 67% of wilderness areas use stewardship groups to complete work on the ground. So, it's no surprise that all Wilderness Rangers answered the same way – in some capacity they work with volunteers on a daily or weekly basis. Sometimes it's as simple as text / e-mail messages to coordinate independent work items or collect trail information. Other times it's a full-blown volunteer work project coordinating many participants and completing a comprehensive agreement.

Molly Johnson, Lead Wilderness Ranger on the Deschutes National Forest mentions, *"We mostly have retired volunteers, but we would really like to see some younger people and all generations represented. Our trainings are difficult for people to attend due to work/school schedules. We have started doing some online or in-person sessions that are recorded."*

"Volunteers are absolutely the bulk of our workforce. We have a group of certified crosscut volunteers that come every spring to open up trails in the Chirichua Wilderness." Amber Wong, Coronado National Forest.

How important are volunteers in accomplishing the program of work for your Wilderness(s)?

The dedicated members of the Backcountry Horseman of America (BCHA) were recognized as a significant partnership group across the US. Many Wilderness Rangers stated that the horse packing experience that BCH brings to projects is incredibly valuable and instrumental in getting gear and supplies to backcountry projects. But the Wilderness Rangers also expressed concern about the need for new BCH members who can carry on the legacy of this valued partnership group, as existing chapter membership ages. Will there be other groups / members who will step up and help continue their volunteer contributions? Or is the agency doing enough to foster these skills within its own workforce?



**Amber Wong,
Coronado NF**

RANGER TO RANGER CONTINUED

Do you know about, or experience any challenges finding or working with partners in your program?

Our panel all agreed that the pros certainly outweigh the cons of working with partner groups, but they acknowledged some challenges they encounter when working with partners. Responses included:

- Balancing partnership goals with agency goals.
- Considering time spent to complete agreements, against time spent implementing project work - Is the paperwork worth the effort?
- Competition among partner groups expressing interest in the same projects.
- Weighing the time needed to provide required training against the time invested by volunteers for project work.
- Weighing the time and financial commitment needed from the agency to transport partners to work sites. (In Alaska transport often requires flights and motorboat transport, rather than trail transport)
- Is there enough staffing to provide Chainsaw / Crosscut Training? First Aid / CPR for volunteer groups?

Conversely, volunteer groups may also express frustrations when working with the agency. Continued turnover within the agency means long standing volunteer groups are often presented with multiple and changing agency contacts. Is it worth their time to complete agreements, trainings, and requirements to follow regulations, and provide accomplishment reporting when all they want to do is cut a few trees off a trail?

"It's a great problem to have, but sometimes we have too many partnerships and it's difficult to choose who should be the one that could help us with a certain project." Hayley Lindsey, Wilderness Manager, Humboldt-Toiyabe NF

"The more rural areas are very challenging to find partners or volunteers. City centers like Tucson or Sierra Vista have no problem finding partners and volunteers." Amber Wong, Coronado NF.

*William Nelson -
Caribou - Targhee NF*



*Rachel Crump, Custer-Gallatin
National Forest, Montana*

RANGER TO RANGER CONTINUED

What is the biggest benefit you see from involving partners in wilderness stewardship?

Wilderness Rangers' sentiment towards volunteers and the benefits they provide were incredibly positive. Alyssa Macuiba, Lead Wilderness Ranger on the Shawnee National Forest expressed it well when she explained, "I mean, I can't do my work without them (volunteers)."

Some of the specific benefits participants highlighted, included:

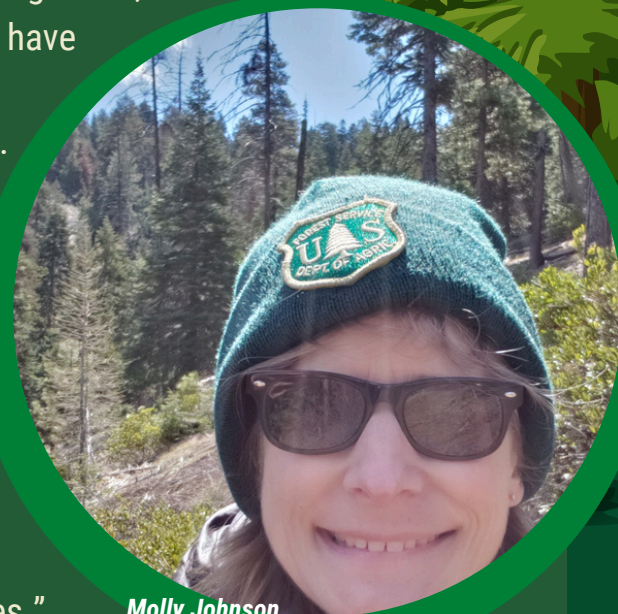
- Promote a healthy lifestyle.
- Nurture a connection to public lands.
- Promote soft skills and a Wilderness Ethic.
- Completion of rapid trail assessments.
- Creation of a new generation of stewards of the land and Wilderness Advocates.
- Foster AmeriCorps programs to find the next generation of public land stewards
- Work towards completion of deferred maintenance items.
- Completion of data collection for various WSP measures (campsite & solitude monitoring, etc)
- Increase and promote public to public interactions and educational opportunities.
- Increase public awareness of USFS, outside of Fire.
- Get a fresh outside opinion on a particular recreation project.
- Increase diversity and inclusion on our public lands.

What, if any, changes have you noticed in how your wilderness area is managed or used?

It is no surprise that all the Wilderness Rangers echoed a similar answer – in the time since COVID the general use of the forest and Wilderness areas has increased dramatically.

For those that have been wilderness rangers a bit longer, they agreed that the increase is most notable in the front country areas. Popular parking areas, bathrooms, short day hikes and well-known (social media) areas have all taken the brunt of the extreme use. Many of the users are visiting for the first time and new to outdoor recreation as whole.

Rangers were also in agreement that only the popular backcountry destinations were being overwhelmed. Areas that were not as picturesque were almost turning back to nature. Many reported their campsite inventories in underutilized area were disappearing and naturally revegetating. Molly Johnson, Lead Wilderness Ranger on the Deschutes National Forest states, "Over the last 20 years that I have lived next to our wilderness areas, I have seen more trail runners, less stock, huge increases in visitor use and more drones."



*Molly Johnson,
Deschutes National Forest*

RANGER TO RANGER

CONTINUED

"The newest use we are seeing is from the Trail Running Community." Devin Douglas, Wilderness / Trails Technician, Cherokee National Forest, Tennessee.

The overall change in recreation management in the last year is hard not to notice. Matthew Brodsky, Lead Wilderness Ranger on the Tongass NF, noted some of the changes he's noticed in Alaska, stating, "My situation is not a unique one, but our entire wilderness department is basically fresh people. There's been a really big hiring effort in the last year and a half for the Alaska region, but there's also been a lot of turnover."

With the recent emphasis on recreation hiring events, some locations now have more employees to complete their Wilderness work and some locations are still shorthanded despite efforts to transition to more permanent employees. As Forest Service units come to an equilibrium with hiring and the training of new employees, there are increased opportunities to address wilderness priorities and much-needed, deferred maintenance tasks. Will the Forest Service be able to maintain and fund this recreation workforce?

The WAG would love to hear from field going staff across the US to better understand how wilderness programs are faring, so we can share that information upward with the Chief. We hope this article inspires you to think about how your program is utilizing partners and agency staff to steward wilderness. What is working well? What areas do you think need improvement?

THANK YOU TO THE WILDERNESS RANGERS WHO PARTICIPATED!

R1: Rachel Crump – Custer Gallatin NF- Montana

R3: Amber Wong – Coconino NF, New Mexico

R4: Hayley Lindsey – Humboldt-Toiyabe NF - Nevada

William Nelson – Caribou-Targhee NF – Idaho / Wyoming

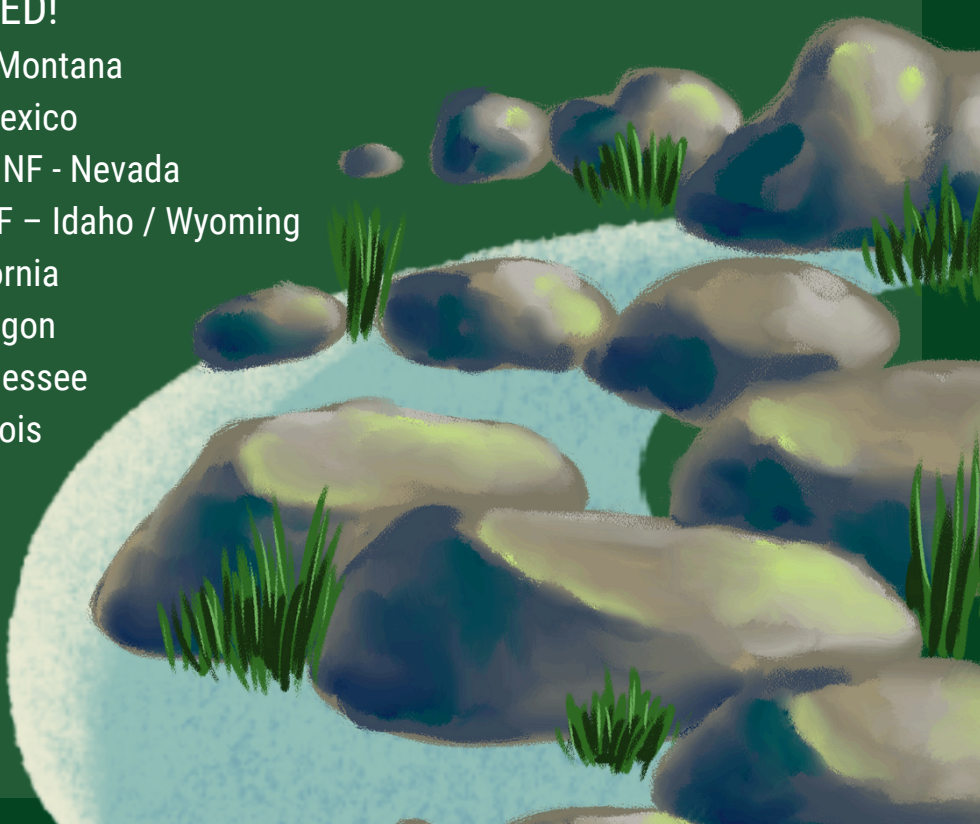
R5: Jesse Kellogg – Eldorado NF - California

R6: Molly Johnson – Deschutes NF - Oregon

R8: Devin Douglas - Cherokee NF – Tennessee

R9: Alyssa Macuiba – Shawnee NF - Illinois

R10: Matt Brodsky - Tongass NF- Alaska



The 60th anniversary of Wilderness Act offers wilderness programs across the country a spectacular opportunity to highlight stories about Wilderness, its unique characteristics, dedicated workforce, and enthusiastic volunteers.



Is your unit hosting an event for the 60th anniversary? Be sure to share information about your event and add to a growing list of upcoming activities on the Wilderness 60 webpage, which can be found on the wilderness.net. website:

<https://wilderness.net/wilderness-60/>

Not sure you have the capacity to support a more formal “event” for the 60th? Consider using the anniversary to draw attention to regular wilderness work or a volunteer project that is already on the books! Outreaching a project as an “anniversary” event may engage new volunteers or help your program connect with youth in your community.

If organizing an event seems a bit too ambitious, think about creating a short media post or news release. The article/post might highlight a unique activity, or work project, acknowledge the efforts of an outstanding volunteer, or feature a resource issue that is of concern in your local wilderness area.

What makes a story memorable? Include a good photo and information that addresses the WHO, WHAT, WHY WHERE, and WHEN of your activity; this can be as short as a couple of sentences!

Not sure where to start? Run the idea past your program manager or district ranger, ask if your forest has a public affairs officer, they may be able to help you craft a short post, article, or podcast. Include one of the 60th logos provided on Wilderness.net to connect your program to a larger audience.

Indigenous artist Thomas “Breeze” Marcus designed the 60th Anniversary logo in collaboration with the Sierra Club. The metaphor of a basket serves Breeze well—in weaving, the beginning and the end merge into one complete and balanced whole.

MEDIA POST IDEAS:

- **A DAY IN THE LIFE:** Highlight the work done by a trail crew, wilderness ranger, river ranger, packer, or lookout.
- **LNT POST:** Address a specific resource concern (food storage, vandalism etc.)
- **HISTORICAL FIGURE/LOCATION:** Provide a photo & short bio about a person or structure with historical links to your wilderness area (first lookout, first ranger etc.)
- **PARTNERSHIP FOCUS:** Advertise a partner’s contributions to your wilderness or trails program.
- **MAJOR IMPROVEMENT UPDATE:** Working on a trail or bridge that is in poor repair? Acknowledge the work that’s getting done!
- **USE OF TRADITIONAL TOOLS:** Highlight a traditional tool: cross-cut saws, pack stock, sled dogs, etc.



Nonprofit partners have become vital to filling the stewardship gap on public lands, lending their valuable time, skill, energy, love of land, and literal boots on the ground to care for places that benefit us all. They assist with backcountry trail maintenance, campsite inventories, monitoring and removal of invasive species, visitor use surveys, and scientific research – all necessary in the preservation of wilderness character. They are nimble, acting quickly to implement ideas and rally resources while engaging diverse volunteers, driving Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives, and educating and connecting communities with public lands. Perhaps most importantly, the places they steward are their backyards. This connection cannot be taught or mandated. It infuses every element of their work, on the trail or off, and is essential to keeping the public in, and engaged with, public lands. By strengthening this community, we strengthen our collective ability to build a robust and resilient Wilderness Preservation System, along with the many benefits it provides for our nation and the world. It is our job to ensure they have the resources and support to thrive.

The National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance (NWSA) supports a national network of public lands stewardship organizations. We build effective partnerships between community-based non-profit organizations, volunteers, and government agencies to add much needed capacity to caring for America's wilderness and public lands. Visit our [website](#) and read our [Strategic Direction](#) to learn more about our work.

WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP FUNDING

Since 2016, NWSA's [Wilderness Stewardship Performance \(WSP\) Grant Program](#), sourced through challenge cost share agreements with the Forest Service, has been an effective tool in supporting partners, boosting Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) scores and preserving wilderness character. In 2023-2024, the program distributed \$2.4 million in grant funding to nonprofit partner organizations, supporting WSP score increases and stewardship activities on almost 40% of Forest Service-managed wilderness areas. Partners have rallied an additional \$6 million in cash and in-kind contributions to support this work, leveraging federal funding at a 2.5:1 ratio and engaging over 7,000 volunteers in 150,000 hours of wilderness stewardship.

Talk about putting the public, in public lands! In the 2023-24 funding cycle, \$1 million in awards is helping nonprofit partners implement a range of WSP projects across 93 wilderness areas, including solitude and invasive species monitoring, recreation site and user trails inventories, wilderness character baseline assessments, and a range of wilderness education activities. The next application round will open in Fall 2024 and is moving online! We are excited to streamline the program, explore ways to reduce bias, build consistency with similar programs, and increase NWSA's capacity to provide new funding opportunities for our community.

The [National Wilderness Workshop \(NWW\)](#) is an annual gathering focused on connecting and empowering the wilderness stewardship community, hosted in alternate years by NWSA and Society for Wilderness Stewardship (SWS). This year, with the [World Wilderness Congress \(Wild12\)](#) being held in the U.S., we are collaborating with the [WILD Foundation](#) to incorporate National Wilderness Workshop-like sessions into the event in lieu of holding a separate National Wilderness Workshop.

WSP GRANT PERFORMANCE



171

wilderness areas supported

7,000+

volunteers engaged in

150,000

hours of stewardship



\$6M

in partner contributions



National Technology & Development Program

The National Technology and Development Program (NTDP) is a problem-solving organization for the Forest Service. NTDP seeks and implements solutions to problems and technical challenges faced by Forest Service employees and partners. For nearly 80 years, our program's approach to creative problem-solving has resulted in unique and innovative products intended to help employees work safely and better manage public resources, including wilderness. Examples of past wilderness-based NTDP products that continue to have a strong influence on how we teach and use traditional tools include The Crosscut Saw Manual, The Crosscut Filer, and One Moving Part: The Forest Service Ax Manual. Check out NTDP's product page to search for other publications, tech tips, and videos that focus on wilderness topics and traditional skills: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/t-d/products.php>

Current projects to be on the lookout for:

Pack Stock Low Impact in the Backcountry Film Series

Twenty (20) Pack Stock Low Impact in the Backcountry films will be completed this winter or early Spring. The Forest Service project sponsor, and subject matter experts, reviewed the 20 films and Thomas Sabol, project manager from NTDP, and Susan Connors, from USDA Office of Communications, are currently editing the films to incorporate comments from these reviews. After the films are updated the Forest Service Washington Office will then review and approve the films for release to the general public this year.

Rigging for Trail Work: Principles, Techniques, and Lessons from the Backcountry

Susan Jenkins, project manager with NTDP, along with Andrew Mclean, George Toyama, and Beth Bramhall of NTDP's Technical Transfer Team, and NTDP retiree Dick Karsky are completing final edits for the Rigging for Trailwork publication: Principles, Techniques, and Lessons from the Backcountry. The final, approved publication is expected later this year. The publication is expected to be a reference for trail and bridge construction work, as well as many other resource projects.

Wilderness Ranger Field Guide Project Summary

Wilderness Advisory Group task team members Holly Henriksen, Grace Corrigan, and Jonathan Brooks are working with NTDP project manager Katie Zarn to develop an updated Wilderness Ranger Field Guide. The project team received feedback from each region about content to include in the updated guide and is currently working on structuring and designing content for the new guide. The updated field guide will be easy to carry and use while in remote field settings and will provide wilderness-specific guidance and reference materials to help rangers continue to succeed and thrive in their roles as stewards and caretakers of wilderness areas.

Wilderness Training Materials and Video Series

Thomas Sabol is producing updated Wilderness Training Materials and a video series to supplement the materials. Sabol is working with Katie Zarn to align the materials and films with the Wilderness Ranger Field Guide that Zarn is working to update.



YOUR REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVES



The Chief's Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG) consists of representatives from each Forest Service Region, along with members from the Washington Office, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. The group was established in 1989 for the purpose of providing advice and counsel to the Chief of the Forest Service on matters related to wilderness stewardship from the perspective of field level managers.

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WAG TASK TEAMS

STORY TELLING

In recognition of the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, the Story Telling team is examining the current state of wilderness stewardship, specifically highlighting youth partnerships in Puerto Rico and Alaska's wilderness areas. Two articles that share the story of partners advancing wilderness stewardship are being prepared for publication with the intent of sharing these stories on a national Forest Service platform. In addition to these in-depth articles, the WAG Team is collecting social media posts from each Region to highlight the diversity of wilderness areas across the United States. The Story Telling Team will be releasing 10 posts through Forest Service social media platforms during National Wilderness Month, September 2024.

WILDERNESS RANGER FIELD GUIDE

WAG Representatives Holly Henriksen (R6,) Grace Corrigan (R10,) and Jonathan Brooks (R2,) are teaming up for the second year in a row with Katie Zarn from NTDP to continue the development of an updated Wilderness Ranger Field Guide. The Team has been meeting monthly to meticulously plan the layout, content, organization, and other aspects of the guide. Designed to be user-friendly, the new guide incorporates feedback from different regions and will provide essential resources for rangers working in Forest Service wilderness areas. It also aims to be nationally relevant, while providing opportunities for inclusion of unit-specific topics and information. It's an ongoing project that will continue into the next year before being published and available for use.

UAS/DRONE SIGNAGE

The UAS/drone Task Team is working on providing a suite of educational signage for units to use and post outside of wilderness, at kiosks and trailheads. These signs will have OGC approved language and link to the FAA Air Aware Application which shows the user's location relative to nearby congressionally designated Wilderness. The Air Aware website states: "This is a wilderness area. Drone use (commercial and personal takeoff and landing) is prohibited within all wilderness areas." This language is similar to the language that will be used on the new signs. [Air Aware - The Leading Airspace & Situational Awareness Tool for Drone Operators \(aloft.ai\)](https://www.faa.gov/air-aware).



2024

WAG TASK TEAMS

Wilderness Relevancy Task Team

The Wilderness Relevancy Task Team is comprised of Phil Walrod, Dan Abbe, and Chip Morrill. The Team's goal is to influence FS leadership and staff, advocating for wilderness stewardship, appropriate administration, and compliance with the Wilderness Act.

The Team's first objective is to increase the number of Line Officers who have taken the Arthur Carhart Interagency National or Regional Wilderness Stewardship Training, so that they can make informed decisions about wilderness management. Due to several factors, there is a substantial backlog of Line Officers who have not yet taken the course(s). The Team intends to support Regional Program Managers by reviewing and updating the list identifying who has not taken the course(s). The team will be asking wilderness data stewards to contact their Line Officers to emphasize the importance of taking the training, as well as sharing updates on scheduled trainings. The intent is to make it easier for Line Officer to access and complete the training.

Our second objective is to make available a template that Wilderness Managers or Data Stewards could use to develop a presentation for Forest Leadership Teams, in order to address the importance of proper wilderness stewardship and management. The intent of this task is to increase awareness and advocacy of wildernesses to FS leaders who may not be directly involved in wilderness management.

UPCOMING ARTHUR CARHART TRAINING SESSIONS IN 2024

- **Regional Wilderness Stewardship Training: Near Missoula, MT - September 16 – 19, 2024.**
- **Regional Wilderness Stewardship Training: Marion, IL - October 7 – 10, 2024.**

NOTE: Target audiences for these trainings:

National Courses: Appropriate for senior-level decision makers with wilderness stewardship oversight.

Regional Courses: Appropriate for mid-level decision makers with wilderness stewardship oversight and staff whose work occurs in wilderness.

ARTHUR CARHART NATIONAL WILDERNESS TRAINING CENTER

"Fostering interagency excellence in wilderness stewardship"



The mission of the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center (ACNWTC) is to equip and inspire agency leaders and partners to ensure that America's National Wilderness Preservation System endures for future generations. We do this through training, information, and education. To learn more about the ACNWTC follow this link: [ACNWTC Home](#)

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT

The ACNWTC provided a new course entitled, The National Wilderness Preservation System: "...for the permanent good of the whole people.." for the [Diversity Outdoor Leadership Institute \(DOLI\)](#) of [Outward Bound Adventures \(OBA\)](#) in Pasadena, California on January 20, 2024. Outward Bound Adventures was established in 1962 to provide underserved youth outdoor education and experiences often in wild places on public lands.



The idea for the course was to establish an ongoing relationship between DOLI and ACNWTC that was initiated by OBA's Executive Director Charles Thomas, Jr.'s attendance at the Harrisonburg, VA Regional Wilderness Stewardship Training in August 2022.

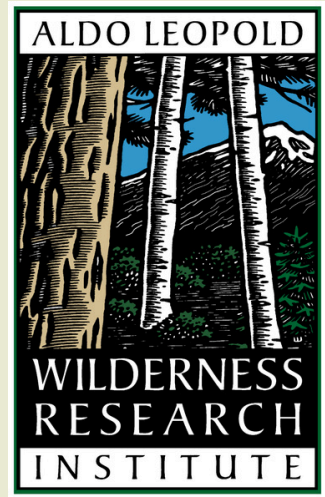
STAFFING:

Rob Burrows was selected as the new National Park Service Representative. Rob has worked in and for wilderness in various capacities for the last 26 years, first conducting research on past glaciers and then monitoring modern ones at North Cascades, Mount Rainier, and Denali National Parks. During those years of mountain adventure and exploration, Rob also worked as a wilderness climbing ranger, ski patroller, and wilderness-focused interpretive ranger. A lifelong student of geography, he championed wilderness character mapping at Denali and North Cascades. He earned a B.S. in Environmental Geology and Technology from the University of North Dakota and a M.Sc. in Geology from Western Washington University. Rob also pursued Ph.D. work in Geography, studying snow and avalanche science at the University of British Columbia.

Kimm Fox-Middleton has accepted a position with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Planning Service Group. Kimm had been serving as the Wilderness Interpretation & Outreach Specialist at ACNWTC.

Dusty Vaughn and **Jimmy Gaudry** both wrapped up their details as the Acting Director and there will be a new Acting Director named soon.

Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute



The Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute (ALWRI) is an interagency, national research facility located on campus at the University of Montana. Administered by the USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, ALWRI is the only federal research group in the United States dedicated to development and dissemination of knowledge needed to steward the nearly 112-million-acre National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). ALWRI has a long history of conducting and sharing science with the National Park Service in support of stewarding the NWPS, as well as collaborating with other management, academic, non-profit, tribal, community, and other partners within the US and internationally.

In 2023, ALWRI staff collaborated on roughly 40 projects related to conservation science and wilderness stewardship, many in conjunction with NPS partners. For a full accounting of our accomplishments from last year, please review our [FY23 Accomplishments Report](#); here we highlight just a few:

Supporting a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Toolbox for Wilderness

In 2023, we authored an article, published in the International Journal of Wilderness, entitled [Toward an Interagency Toolbox for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Wilderness: Findings from Five Focus Group Discussions with Wilderness Professionals](#). This paper considers how wilderness managers may prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), though they may lack wilderness-specific tools and resources to foster commitments to DEI. As agencies and organizations turn to virtual resources to share information - what we refer to as toolboxes - questions remain about their utility and potential to impact DEI outcomes in wilderness. We described the process and results of five virtual focus group discussions with wilderness managers and key partners aimed at better understanding DEI toolbox-related needs, as well as the limitations of a DEI toolbox and opportunities to maximize potential impact of any DEI-related efforts. Our findings highlighted that an interagency DEI toolbox for wilderness management could collate resources and present lessons learned from innovation happening across the National Wilderness Preservation System, where wilderness-specific DEI goals are currently ambiguous. Participants in the focus groups emphasized a need for leadership support and funds to advance innovation and partnerships with diverse organizations. We also highlight challenges associated with recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, and navigating a wilderness culture that some participants feel has sidelined diverse connections with and stewardship of wilderness.

A DEI toolbox could benefit practitioners - but may be most impactful if considered as complementary to other federal initiatives seeking to diversify workforces, fund innovation, and grow partnership with organizations representing underserved communities. We are currently working with the Forest Service to secure funding to update the Wilderness Connect toolboxes to incorporate more diverse perspectives and stories into overviews of important wilderness topics, and include information relevant to advancing DEI goals.

Wildlife responses to recreation noise: Developing a critical understanding for a growing concern

In 2023, researchers used novel technology to project recreation-associated sounds and record video footage of wildlife reactions in the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming. They are using this data to assess mammal behavioral and stress responses to recreation sounds; estimate changes in mammal and bird use of areas; and quantify changes in diversity. This work was also featured in two popular print publications, [The Atlantic](#) and [High Country News](#), and was inspirational to a University of Montana senior class Capstone Project, who learned about the study and created a StoryMap about [soundscapes, recreation noise and natural environments](#) for their senior project.

Pyrodiversity and Aquatic Biodiversity in Wilderness

In the summer of 2023, a University of Montana master's student began collecting eDNA samples in the Bob Marshall Wilderness area and sent her preliminary results to BMWA managers. The ALWRI team and UM graduate student presented results from the first year's field work at the Bob Marshall Managers meeting in early December. This research was also featured in the Bob Marshall Foundation newsletter article. The master's student used feedback from BMWA managers to refine research questions and hypotheses and is currently working on a formal academic research proposal for UM evaluation. ALWRI's resident fire ecologist will further support the project by contributing information on remote sensed dataset.

Evaluating a RAD decision-making framework to address climate change in wilderness

The resist, accept, direct (RAD) framework may provide a decision-making space for managers, partners, and researchers to respond to and prepare for uncertainty in future environmental conditions. The ALWRI RAD in Wilderness project engages interagency managers, partners, and scientists in evaluating a RAD decision-making framework for use in wilderness.

Last year, the RAD team selected four case studies, one per wilderness-administering federal agency (USDA Forest Service, DOI Fish and Wildlife Service, DOI National Park Service, and DOI Bureau of Land Management). ALWRI researchers identified management challenges and developed biological and social science research protocols for each study.

The Forest Service case study focuses on impacts of climate change on range-wide persistence of federally threatened whitebark pine (WBP). In 2023 ALWRI staff began interviews with Forest Service managers to better understand managers' experiences and perceptions around climate change (generally and on WBP in particular) and thoughts of the role of wilderness for WBP conservation. Interview participants include wilderness staff, botanists, ecologists, silviculturists, forest health specialists, and geneticists across national, regional and forest-level organizational units. Our team gathered information on managers' experiences around climate change impacts, and the perceptions of the role of wilderness for WBP conservation, currently and in the future. The people interviewed represented various capacities intersecting with WBP (e.g. wilderness staff, botanists, ecologists, silviculturists, forest health specialists, and geneticists), across national, regional and forest-level organizational units. ALWRI scientists are also modeling current and future climatic habitat suitability for WBP, with a particular focus on the role of wilderness areas as potential climatic refugia. For the coming year, project leads are planning an in-person 2-day workshop which will convene rights holders and diverse F.S. staff from across WBP's range, serve as a platform to share results, and to explore how the RAD framework may be applied to support WBP recovery and conservation efforts.

Developing and evaluating an approach to shared stewardship in high-use wilderness areas

A collaborative group, including USFS managers and planners, ALWRI scientists, NGOs, and tribal communities are among the entities participating in the Alpine Lakes Collaborative (ALC); a shared stewardship group focused on planning the future of a high use wilderness area outside of Seattle. We initiated this project in response to the need for understanding challenges and opportunities for shared and equitable stewardship, and to identify how transferable the approach we are using in this project might be for other wilderness areas. In 2023, ALWRI conducted interviews and collected data for the ALC, supported partner engagement including with Tribal partners, and worked with UW researchers to prep two manuscripts around co-management. Project collaborators met in Missoula at the National Wilderness Workshop and shared co-management case studies as a session. We have also been in discussions with the Snoqualmie Tribe about a potential community workshop.



Kathy Zeller, recipient of
Best Scientific Publication Award,
Rocky Mountain Research Station



Sean Parks, recipient of
Best Scientific Publication Award,
Rocky Mountain Research Station

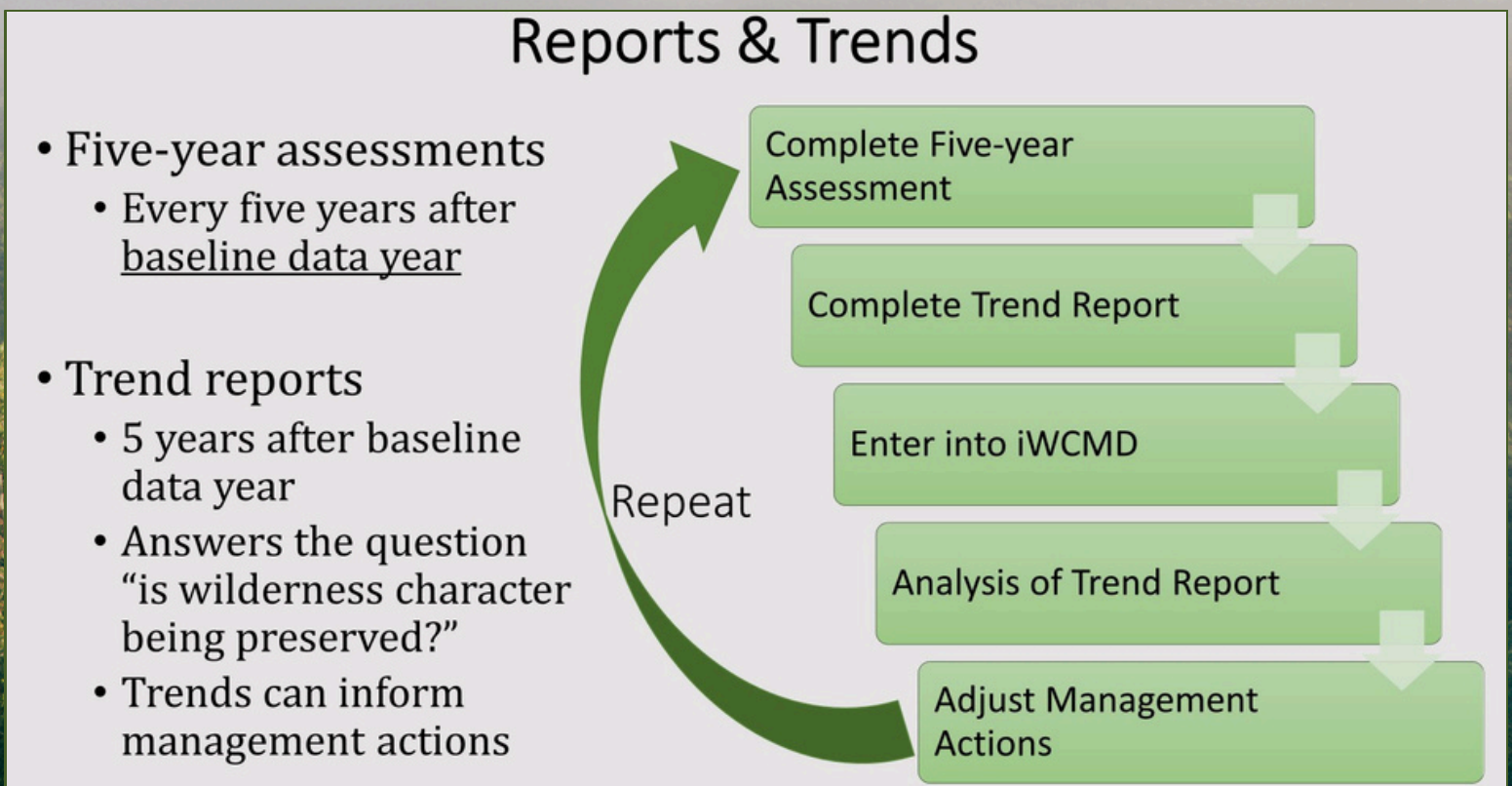
In FY23, ALWRI staff produced 24 peer-reviewed publications and technical reports; delivered numerous presentations to a myriad of audiences, including professional organizations, to academic seminar series; and engaged with wilderness managers across agencies and regions, throughout the United States. In recognition of their exemplary efforts, two of our scientists were granted awards by the Rocky Mountain Research Station. Sean Parks and Kathy Zeller received Best Scientific Publication Award from the Rocky Mountain Research Station for their work on threats to the global protected area network under climate change.

As we anticipate the coming year, we look forward to collaborating with the Wilderness Advisory Group, as we strive together to advance wilderness stewardship through transformational science.

WILDERNESS CHARACTER MONITORING (WCM) CENTRAL TEAM UPDATES

Implementation of Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) is in full swing, thanks to a FY23, \$1.5 million infusion of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds for priority WCM and Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) partner projects. \$1,083,250 of the IRA funds were invested in partnership work with Society for Wilderness Stewardship (SWS), Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards (SAWS), and Student Conservation Association (SCA) to implement WCM baseline reports. The WWSR program also received \$1 million (FY23) in NFRW to fund National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance WSP grants. Of the \$810,000 in NWSA grants that were awarded in FY23, \$82,257 went to three partners, Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, New Mexico Wild, and Selway Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation, for WCM implementation work.

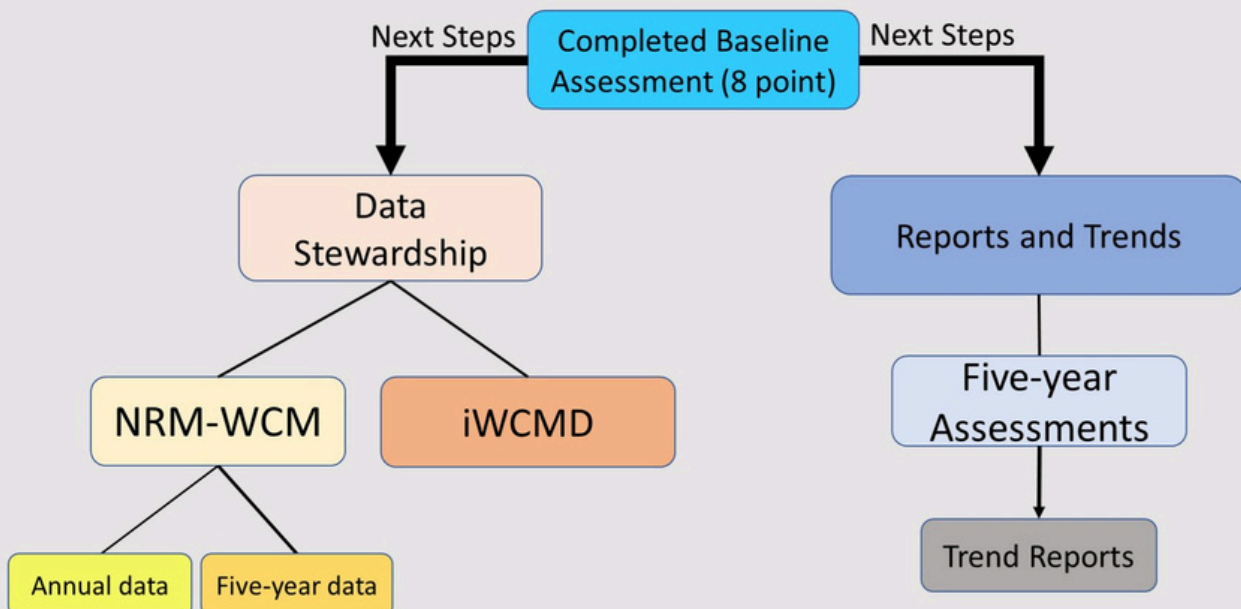
Of the \$2.5 million total invested in WSP and WCM in 2023, \$1,165,507 directly supported WCM implementation and most of the funds that are not directly supporting WCM implementation are supporting important WSP work and partnerships that produce information and monitoring data needed for WCM. This investment has helped us to reach the halfway mark with 218 wildernesses (49%) having completed WCM baseline assessments and another 33 (7%) that are completed and just waiting for a final signature. Also, thanks in large part to the funding boost, another 122 (27%) wildernesses are in progress on their WCM baselines this year and we were able to fund the initiation of several 5-year WCM trend assessments reports in 2024.



This is a critical year for WCM as we are working to complete the remaining WCM baseline assessments while also getting started on the first round of five-year WCM trend assessment reports. Approximately 30 wildernesses are scheduled to initiate five-year trend assessments in 2024. The WCM Central Team is busy working to develop several things to support work on trend assessments including a Five-Year WCM Trend Assessment Report Template and an example of a complete trend assessment using the template; a WCM Trend Assessment Summary Report Template; a guidance document and Q and A's; estimates of time and resources needed to complete trend assessments, a trend assessment rotation schedule, and tools to help get organized ahead of starting a trend assessment. Additionally, we will be taking the Five-Year WCM Trend Assessment Report Template and using completed baselines to create customized templates for each wilderness that will already have the baseline assessment values entered into the templates. Both SWS and SAWS are beginning to support trend assessment work and are contributing to the development of the guidance, tools and templates we are preparing. The WCM Program is also working closely with the WIMST WCM Task Team to produce a WSP Element – WCM Measure Crosswalk to aid in understanding how information and data gathered as part of WSP relates to WCM measures. The task team is also working on editing the WSP Guidebook to include language highlighting the linkages between WSP and WCM. The task team is also developing a paper on best practices for implementing WCM with partners. We will continue to update the WCM Pinyon site (<https://bit.ly/45h301n>) as these new resources are completed.

As we get deeper into WCM implementation we are collectively learning more about the process. While baseline work is still occurring our focus has expanded to what comes after the baseline: the cycle of data management, reporting and five-year assessments. With this expanded focus we have increased our WCM Central Team partner capacity by .75 FTE. We are continuing to identify both real and perceived barriers for WCM implementation and looking for creative ways to streamline the work and support the field with training, resources and coaching through all phases of WCM implementation.

WCM: After Baseline Assessment Completion



WILDERNESS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STEERING TEAM

The Wilderness Information Management Steering Team (WIMST) consists of representatives from each Region, along with members from the Washington Office and academia. The group was established in 1999 for the purpose of promoting quality wilderness stewardship at all levels of the organization through the effective and efficient use of information and data.

During the Fiscal Year 2024 planning meeting in November 2023 on the El Yunque National Forest, the group decided to go back to basics and focus on the wilderness program fundamentals, Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) and Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP). Additional task teams were selected from a list of outstanding ideas that were brought forward by team members based on regional input. A brief description of the WIMST task teams are below and additional information about WIMST can be found at the [FY 2024 WIMST Work Plan](#).

Wilderness Character Monitoring

As more WCM baseline assessments are established and some wilderness areas move into trend assessments, we are learning better ways to complete WCM work, internally and with our valuable partners assistance. The WCM task team is focusing on the following tasks: Develop a “Best Practices” document to help units be more successful working with partners to complete WCM Baseline Assessments; Update and clarify the Wilderness Character Baseline element in the WSP Guidebook; Develop WCM reporting/monitoring cycle support tools; Share success stories.

Wilderness Stewardship Performance

WSP is entering its 10th year as the agency wilderness performance measure. While the performance measure is succeeding in tracking agency management actions, some minor changes are needed for a few elements. The Natural Role of Fire element is being modified to address new terminology and agency priorities, such as prescribed fire. The Trails elements is being updated to address concerns that taking action in all situation’s conditions don’t match Trail Management Objectives is not achievable as well as to provide clarification with user created trails tasks. Task team members will complete quality control calls with units that have struggled with end of year reporting for both WSP and WCM to determine barriers that impact reporting. And, a short introduction to WSP and WCM training webinar will be delivered at the end of April to help new data stewards and wilderness managers understand these programs.

Wilderness Connect

Wilderness Connect is a significant resource for wilderness managers and the public. As valuable as Wilderness Connect is, there is always room for improvement. The Wilderness Connect task team will continue to review and suggest improvements to Toolboxes, develop and share wilderness stewardship stories on a soon to be created location within Wilderness Connect, and develop agency wide promotional products to help the public and managers better use Wilderness Connect for research and self-paced training.



WILDERNESS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STEERING TEAM

Tribal Action Plan

In February 2023, the Forest Service released “Strengthening Tribal Consultations and Nation-to- Nation Relationships” (Action Plan). In direct response to the Action Plan, WIMST developed a task team to focus on reviewing wilderness program priorities and making needed changes to align with the Action Plan. This task team is working on: Evaluating ways to better integrate Action Plan elements into the WSP Agency Management Actions, Cultural Resources, Education, Wilderness Character Baseline, and Workforce Capacity elements; Review WCM measures that relate to tribal connections and relations; Develop suggestions on how to build wilderness focused relationships with forest/regional Tribal Relation specialists; Share stories celebrating examples of tribal relations and wilderness programs; Coordinate with the Office of Tribal Relations.



Region 1: Colter Pence (Vice Chair), Flathead NF-Hungry Horse RD

Region 2: Andrea Maichak (+1), Bighorn NF

Region 3: Pat McGervey, Coconino NF-Flagstaff RD

Region 4: Tim Farris, Bridger-Teton NF-Jackson RD

Region 5: Travis Mason, San Bernardino NF

Region 6: Molly Johnson, Deschutes NF

Region 8: Mason Boring, Cherokee NF-Ocoee/Hiwassee RD

Region 9: Stacy Duke, Hoosier NF

Region 10: Karisa Garner, Tongass NF

Academia: Troy Hall, Oregon State University, College of Forest Ecosystems and Society

WO: Katie Armstrong, Director Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

WO: Portia Jelinek, Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

WO: Eric Sandeno, Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers

TRAILS ADVISORY GROUP

The Trail Advisory Group (TAG) is a collection of field-going trail professionals, representing each region of the Forest Service. The group serves as a communication channel between the field and Forest Service leadership, elevating trail program-related concerns and providing a field perspective on national level trail initiatives. The TAG participates in National Trail Board (NTB) calls and works with the National Trail Board and Washington Office trail program on planning efforts.

2024 Recent Happenings and Projects

In October, several TAG members attended the weeklong National Trails Board Meeting in Sandy, OR. During the meeting TAG members provided input on the FY Trails Program of Work and embedded TAG members into different project teams. In FY24 TAG member teams are working on trail core competency development, trail sustainability, reestablishing the trails construction certification (NCCP) trainings for trail contracting, trail planning tools and developing best practices for managing partner projects.

2023/2024 TAG members:

Region 1 Mark Smith

**Region 2 Christopher Bouton
(TAG Chair)**

Region 3 Forrest Saville

Region 4 Justin Blackstead

Region 5 Tracy Knapp,

Region 6 Kevin Rowell

Region 8 Don Kelly

Region 9 Katie Lemoine

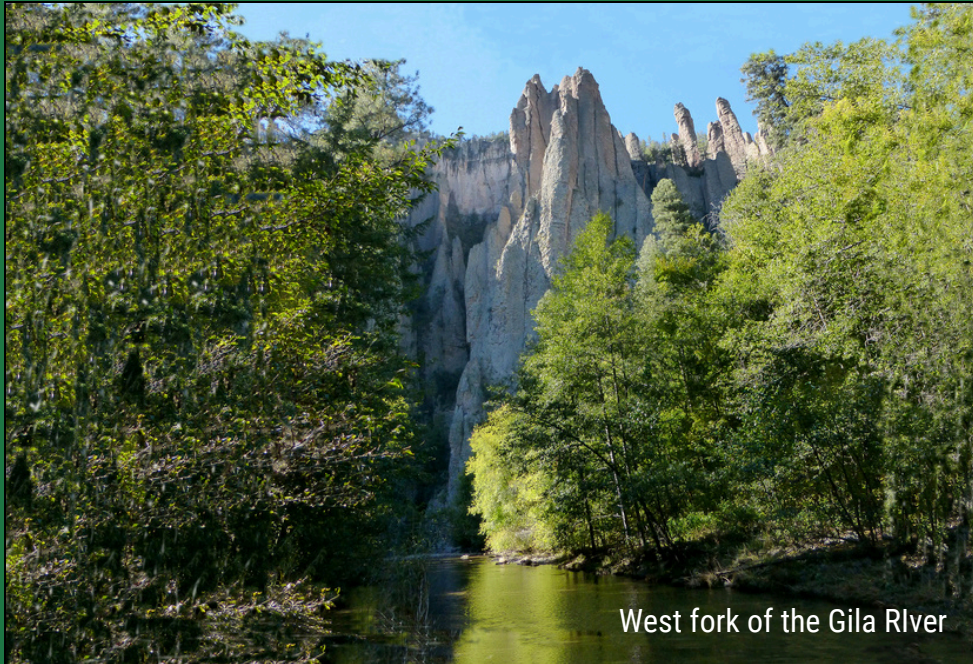
Region 10 Laurent Deviche

The TAG is also working on the following two avenues to provide virtual mentoring and training:

- Trail Talk is Live! Trail Talk is a list-serve forum, where folks can ask about and offer solutions to trail management challenges, similar to the “Rec Talk” list-serve that many of us are familiar with. To sign up and participate in Trail Talk, click here: TrailTalk-subscribe-request@newsbox.usda.gov
- TAG Trail Crew Talks – Keep an eye out for a series of presentations that will roll out in March. These presentations will be geared towards an FS audience with trail crew leaders and local program managers in mind. Some example topics are: How to Develop a Trail Maintenance Schedule, Managing Trail Partnerships, and many more.



WILDERNESS SPOTLIGHT : NEW MEXICO'S GILA



West fork of the Gila River

It took Aldo Leopold, a Forest Service employee working in New Mexico, to initiate a federal wilderness concept.

He argued against the proposed expansion of a road system in the backcountry of the Gila National Forest and proposed instead that a large area be left roadless and preserved for wilderness recreation. On June 3, 1924, 755,000 acres were set aside by the Forest Service, as the Gila Wilderness, the first designated wilderness in the world. 2024 marks the Gila's 100th anniversary.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gila/learning/history-culture/?cid=stelprdb5038907>

THANK YOU

FOR YOUR CONTINUED WORK AS

STEWARDS OF AMERICA'S ENDURING WILDERNESS RESOURCE!

For more information please visit:

National Wilderness Program SharePoint Site (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/FSWilderness>

Chief's WAG (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/ChiefsWAG>

WIMST (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/WIMST>

ALWRI: <https://leopold.wilderness.net/>

ACNWTC: <https://carhart.wilderness.net/>



National Trails Program (FS Internal): <https://bit.ly/FSTrails>