

FY22 Partner Survey - Trail Program

A survey conducted by the Washington Office Trails Program in partnership with the University of Colorado Denver

Purpose: To evaluate the current perceptions of the US Forest Service (FS) trail partners and volunteers on their experiences working with the FS on topics such as:



Being a Partner or Volunteer



Project Work



Trainings



Barriers



Staffing Impacts



Partnerships & Experiences



COVID-19



Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion



Communications & Collaborations

Forest Service Priorities



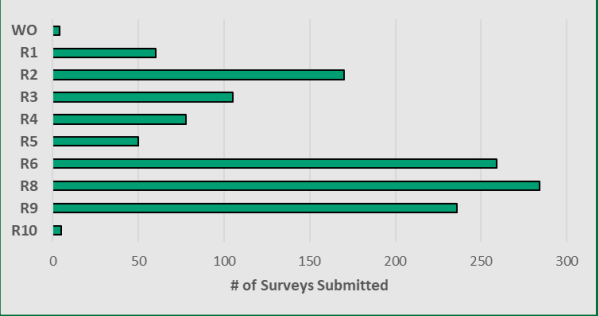
Feedback & Next Steps

Washington Office
National Trail Program
Feb. 2022

1,299

Completed Surveys

Surveys Received by Region



108

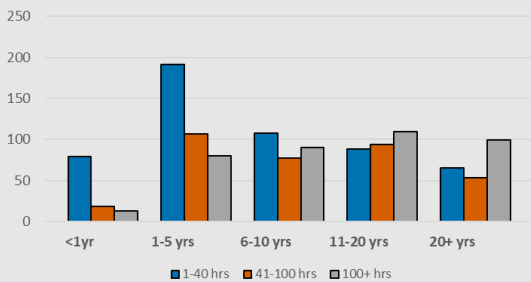
Forests/ Grasslands

Forest/Grasslands Represented by Region

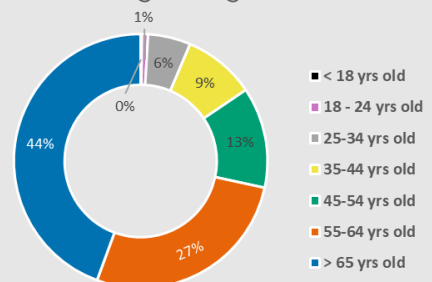


Not enough Forest Service workers to coordinate and work with the volunteers...There is an army of volunteers waiting to help but the FS **does not utilize public media well** enough to let the public know what is needed. There must be **more FS recreational trail employees** added because volunteers cannot work by themselves.

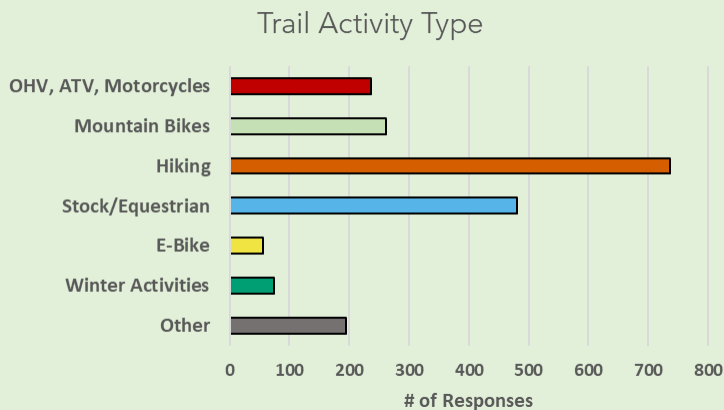
Years with the FS + Annual Hours Worked



Age Range



Our Partners & Volunteers



*Other category consisted of backpacking, 4x4 driving, trail maintenance, running, and water trails.

Why Volunteer?

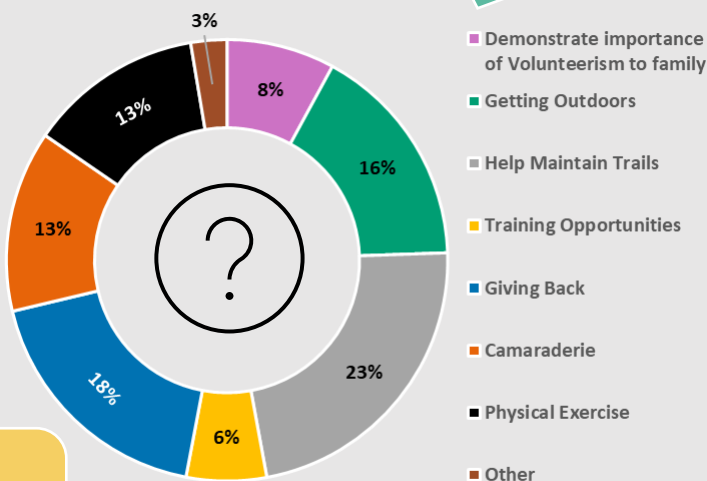
"Engage youth on the importance of maintaining and creating safe and sustainable trails."

"If we don't do it, the trails will disappear."

"Civic duty."

"Keep public access open."

"Using our mules for a good purpose."



"Seeking partnerships for trail planning and building is part of our mission."

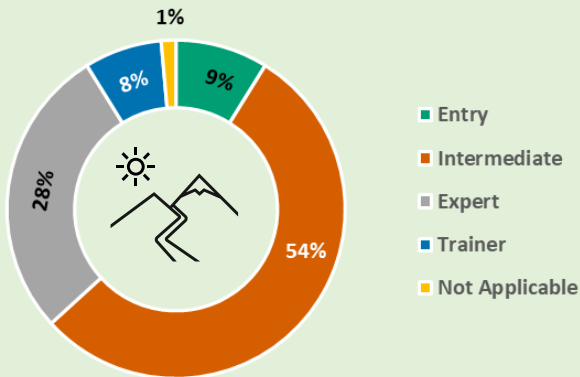
"I own a local business and recognize the value of trails to attract visitors."

"Helping the US Forest Service as they are understaffed."

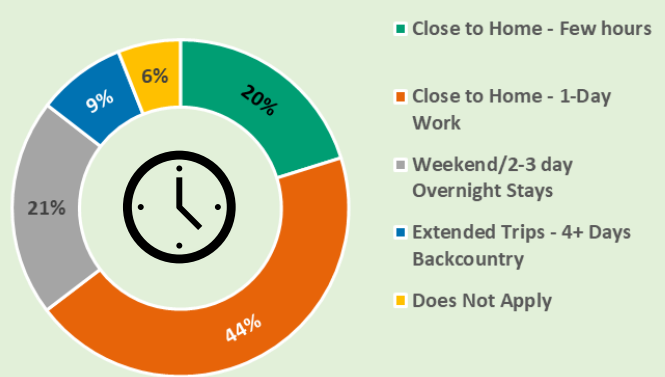


Technical Trail Skill Level

(Respondents self-identified their level of technical trail skills)



Levels of Time Commitment



2/3 of respondents participated in 'close to home' projects.

Top 5 Tasks/Projects Performed

1 - Annual Maintenance: (brushing, trimming, maintaining blazes of trail signs, etc.)

2 - Heavy/Deferred Maintenance: (replacing worn-out structures, de-berming, etc.)

3 - Chainsaw or Crosscut Saw Work

4 - Community Engagement/Outreach

5 - Trail Planning, Design, and/or Layout

Over half of respondents self-identified their technical trail skills as **intermediate**.

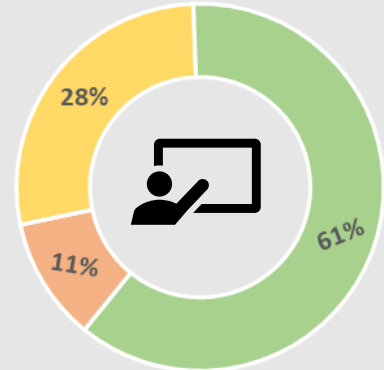
Trainings



Many respondents reported **receiving training** through their partner or volunteer organizations.

Training Availability

Poor Fair Good



Training must resume. We are unable to do anything because we **can't get the certifications** we need to be allowed to work. We usually **wait 2 or 3 weeks** to get a meeting with USFS to discuss trail issues....

Most Important Trainings Needed

1 - Trail Construction: (Clearing, hand built/mechanized trail construction, etc.)

2 - Drainage Features/Water Management

3 - Maintenance Specifications:
(Understanding maintenance standards)

4 - Tread Maintenance: Hand Tools
(crosscut and other hand tools)

5 - Corridor Clearing: Hand Tools
(crosscut and other hand tools)



Retired **FS recreation employees** are **not** being **replaced**. Employees are asked to do **more with less people** and **neglect recreation sites**. We need these beautiful areas maintained, improved, & enlarged.

Most Common Barriers to Accomplishing More Trail Work with Partners & Volunteers

1 - Lack of FS Employees' Availability to Coordinate/Support Work

2 - Not Enough Partners/Volunteers

3 - Lack of Knowledge of Opportunities

4 - Lack of Training Accessibility

5 - Too Many Paperwork Requirements



Backlogged maintenance could be accomplished if the USFS **made getting involved easier** and wider known. **Advertise opportunities**. Make sure personnel is there to take phone calls and reply in a timely manner.



Staffing Impacts

"There is **not enough bandwidth** across FS staff to adequately respond to all our requests, proposals, and inquiries."

"We **rely** on our **local FS staff** to prioritize and assign us to projects suitable for our group. We understand they are spread thin, so it is a situation that exacerbates itself."

"At meetings we are told FS will provide materials or services, but it often doesn't happen because there just **wasn't staff available** to do it."

"I'd love to see **more staff available** to support trainings for partners and **more consistency** in communicating about trail standards and trail sustainability."

50% of respondents selected **lack of Forest Service (FS) staff** to coordinate or support work as a barrier to accomplish **more trail work**.

"We need **FS staff availability** to **engage in trail projects**."

"**Recreation staff** have been **cut over the years**. Volunteer organizations have picked up the slack but the planning [**NEPA**] has become the **roadblock** due to a lack of FS staff."

"An ongoing issue is **lack of engagement** by local FS staff. Simple, **basic questions** remain **unaddressed** for sometimes years on end. It took one group three years to begin to implement new trail construction that was specifically given a high priority in the Forest Plan...."

"We **need FS staff** at the ground and leadership level - the agency's inability to fill vacancies or support hiring through funding mechanisms like the Great American Outdoors Acts. We **can't do good work** as a partner if we don't have the FS staff to coordinate."



Staffing Impacts - Leadership

"**Every spring** we have a **meeting** with the Ranger and other personnel about trail work, etc..."

"If the supervisory FS Personnel are **not supportive** then **nothing gets done.**"

"Need district ranger support to **allow** well-proven **volunteer organizations** to **take on tasks** that are going undone due to lack of staff or priority."

"The ranger has to **want trails** and **want volunteers to assist.** I wish we could get rangers... to have the same interest and outreach."

District Ranger support was identified as the **most common** contributing **factor of success** and **experience** for **partnerships and volunteers.**

"**Dialogue** with the District Ranger to **understand scope of work** and for **mutual support.**"

"We have **never met the District Ranger.** It'd be nice if they came by during training, planning sessions, or a monthly meeting to thank us for the work... it'd be nice to have **some recognition from Management.**"

"...Districts where Rangers are **interested in working** with our group, we get a lot of good work done. It's very discouraging when a Ranger **doesn't support collaborative solutions** between competing user groups even when they agree on a solution... trail users suffer because of it..."

"I would like to see **more support/advocacy** from **leadership** to actively support volunteer programs. Recognize that partnering requires sharing power and giving volunteers who have the training/experience some decision-making ability."

Partnerships & Experiences



Volunteers are **willing to do the work**....When you expect to work projects then get told to just pick up trash, it makes the **volunteer feel used**. Appreciation and acknowledgement is key....There needs to be a **standard retention policy/practice**.

Top 10 Contributing Factors for a Successful Partnership and Volunteer Experience

1 - District Ranger Support

2 - Communication

3 - Coordination Help

4 - Volunteer Coordinator

5 - Trainings

6 - Agency Support

7 - District Tools Cache

8 - Project Oversight

9 - Limiting Bureaucracy

10 - Clear Expectations & Standards

Other Factors Mentioned...

Federal Funding Staff Buy-in Timely Approvals

Camaraderie Staff Involvement Trust

Prompt Responses Sawyer Certifications

Collaborative Efforts Outreach Provide Materials/Tools

Timely Notification of Opportunities/Trainings

COVID-19: Impacts

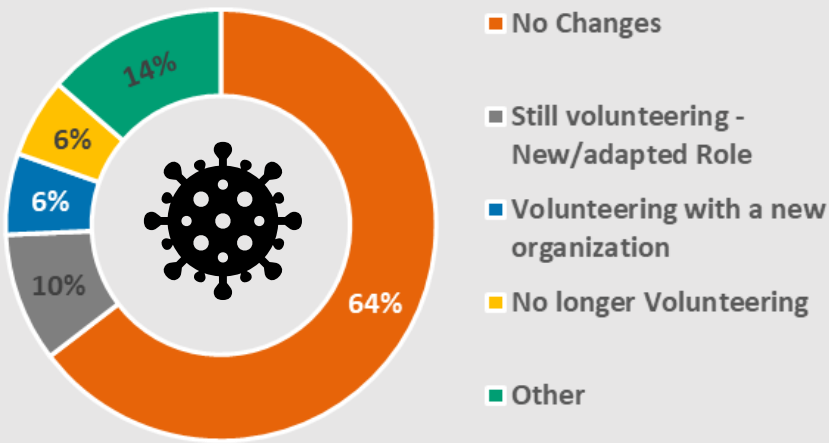


Over half of respondents noted **no changes** in their volunteer involvement with the Forest Service since COVID-19.

"Reduced opportunities and limited FS staff capacity to manage volunteer-led projects has impacted our ability to get projects done."

"A lot of online work, less outdoor group work."

Changes in Volunteering since March 2020



"I can't do heavy trail work, but I would love to help with training and outreach."

"Our partnership has diminished since COVID in part due to housing restrictions and staff working remotely."

"...Virtual meetings are very problematic or don't work well when someone lives in a semi-remote location."

“ **Communication was one-way**, restricting the activities of volunteers...It would have been helpful to have **meetings with volunteers** to develop procedures and update best practices.

Good/Open Communication

Lessen Restrictions Online Resources/Trainings Explain Policy Changes/Updates
Adjust/Adapt Policies Staff Involvement/Presence
Outdoor Opportunities Don't Shut Down Work
Improve Communication Lessen Restrictions Working Outdoors

Improving Volunteer Experiences Considering Pandemic Impacts

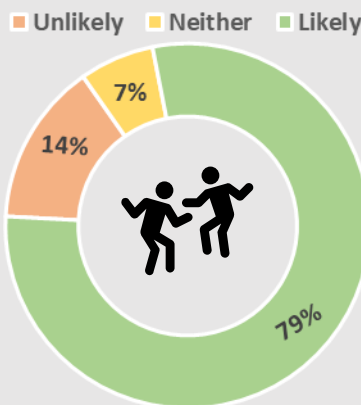
Allow Small Group Trainings/Opportunities No Impact Keep Forests Open Communicate More
Consistent Guidelines Clearly Advertise Volunteer Opportunities
Good Job So Far Keep Facilities/Offices Open
Allow Trail Work to Continue Mandate Vaccine, Testing, Masks

“ COVID **protocols** are **not followed consistently** across districts and forests...It's challenging to enforce our protocols when FS employees aren't holding themselves to the **same standards**.



“ **Hire** more **diverse rangers**...consider **recruiting** at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Indigenous-serving institutions. Have **more opportunities** on the **weekends**...Make it clear that they don't need special equipment or gear especially when first starting out....

How likely are you to recommend volunteering with the Forest Service to someone else?



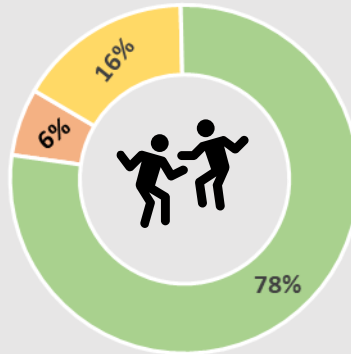
“ Volunteers gravitate where they feel comfortable. In many cases, **trail users are unaware** that nearly all **trail maintenance** on our forest is **performed by volunteers**. **Raising awareness of available volunteer opportunities** to everyday trail users will drive increased participation and diversity.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion



How welcomed do you feel with the Forest Service?

■ Seldom/Never ■ Sometimes ■ Always/Often



It **doesn't seem** like many FS employees have received **basic DEI training**. We regularly have interactions where FS employees **dismiss** the sharing of **pronouns**, make **microaggressions** focused on gender identity and sexual orientation or use **racial stereotypes**. These instances have been dealt with by leadership, but these behaviors seem **pervasive**.

Improving Inclusivity for a Wider Audience

Welcoming Environment Communication

Personable Staff Underrepresented Group Partnerships Appreciation
Value Partnerships Limiting Bureaucracy Provide Food, uniforms, or other perks

Staff/Trainer Diversity Staff Involvement

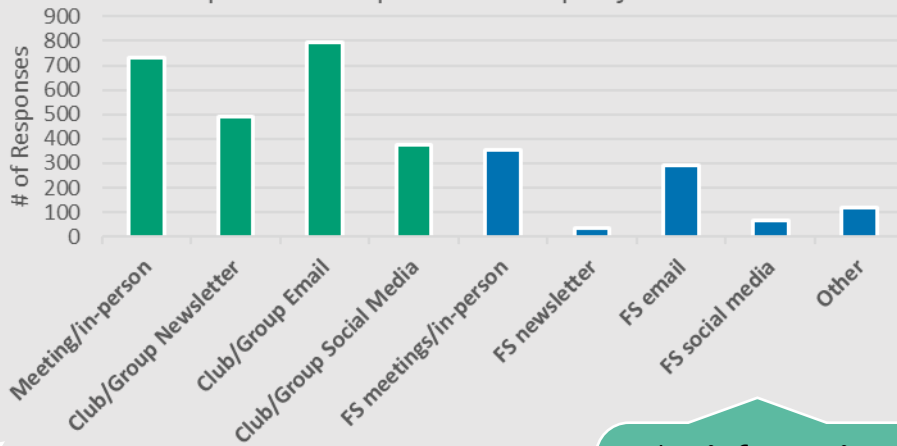
Intentional Outreach Listen to Needs
Share/Recognize Partnerships

Good Job So Far Provide Trails Training
Enough/More FS Staff

Advertise Opportunities Timely Notification of Opportunities



Communications - Forest Service(FS) trail priorities, plans, and projects

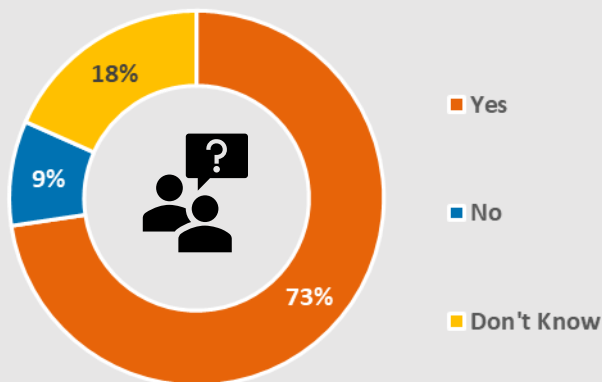


"An email is sent out 1-2 days prior to a workday. This **needs improvement.**"

"This **information is not readily available** from the Forest Service. I have to specifically request it and often no information is provided."

"When you get to know FS staff well enough, they will call you or email you to advise you of events happening..."

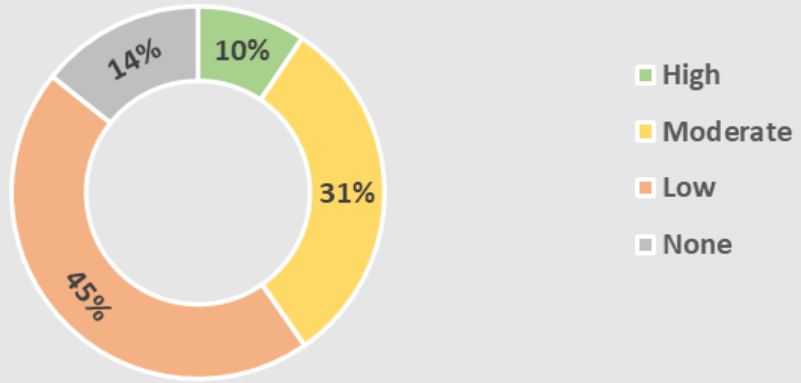
Trail Organizations Collaborations in Local Area



Forest Service Priorities

Familiarity – FS Trail Priorities

(10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge & National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System)



Over 50% of respondents have little to no familiarity with the Forest Service Trail Program's current priorities.

“

I had **not heard** about the 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship program until recently, there should be a **better method of sharing** with volunteer groups. The public should be **involved in the process** from the start, not after the USFS has made the plan. A lot of **important knowledge is being ignored** when volunteers are excluded.

Feedback



"My group of maintainers are getting older. How do we setup a pipeline of volunteers to take over more leadership roles?"

"Trail programs will be the face of the future."

"A volunteer coordinator at the Forest level would go a long way in accomplishing more work from volunteers on USFS lands."

"Their needs to be a change in culture within the agency from looking for reasons why it won't work to finding solutions to make it work."

"The Forest Service needs to be sensitive to the multi-user aspect of trail design and use. Safety concerns must be paramount."

"You've got great people. Especially Trails people in the FS. They are passionate, skilled, and they are TIRED."

Next Steps...

The Washington Office Trail Program staff have started holding listening sessions with various levels of leadership to professionalize the trail program and improve communication.

For any follow up or feedback:

Contact us at WO_Trail_Program@USDA.gov

Washington Office
National Trail Program
Feb. 2022