



February 9, 2023

Senator Maria Cantwell
511 Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Adequate Funding for Road Maintenance and Repair in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS NF)

Dear Senator Cantwell:

I am the president of **Citizens for Forest Roads (CFFR)**, which is a volunteer ad hoc group that advocates keeping public roads access to federal land (national forest) for present and future generations. Our focus has been on the Mt. Baker Ranger District (MBRD), at the northern end of the MBS NF. CFFR has partnered with the local MBRD in various ways ranging from inventorying road drainage deficiencies, performing road maintenance work (including: cleaning culverts, cleaning ditch lines, filling potholes and ruts, removing trees, branches, rocks, and other debris, etc.) and obtaining grants for improvements and the sharing of information among Forest users. With approval of district staff, we focus volunteer labor and in-kind donations to do routine maintenance and repairs. CFFR works to sustain the economic benefits from recreation access to forest roads and trails continues.

Fixing known road problems reduces future road failure impacts by 10-fold on streams and rivers and allows continued recreation access that is now lost for 3-4 years under current Forest Service processes. This was the premise of the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan and has been ignored on the MBRD NF.

As our Senator, you sit on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, where bills receive their first hearings in Congress. I understand that you are behind efforts to replace road culverts to improve fish (salmon and steelhead) passage and reduce habitat damage.

The MBS NF encompasses the mainstem and headwaters of the Nooksack, Skagit Stillaguamish, Snohomish, Duwamish (Green), and Puyallup (White) river watersheds, which provide significant public natural resource and recreational opportunities.

We want to draw your attention to three major concerns of CFFR:

- 1) The continued lack of an adequate budget and staffing for maintaining the hundreds of miles of public roads on the MBS NF.
- 2) Critical shortage of qualified, “Forest Service Certified,” engineering staff required to produce and to administer road repairs contracts.
- 3) Loss of economic benefits to Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, King, and Pierce counties due to loss of road-related recreation access.

The natural beauty of the glaciated landform of the Cascades encourages outdoor recreation use on the MBS NF. However, without road maintenance in these areas drainage instability would increase. The lack of adequate funding for road maintenance including culvert replacement significantly increases the risk of road failures and landslides that can damage downstream natural resources and human life.

In addition, the following critical resources are at risk: 1) downstream public and private resources (recreation areas, bridges, towns, utilities, and other sites), and 2) ESA listed fish stocks (Puget Sound Chinook Salmon, Puget Sound Steelhead, and Coastal/Puget Sound Bull Trout stocks) in the Nooksack, Skagit, Stillaguamish, Snohomish, Duwamish (Green), and Puyallup (White) river systems.

We applaud the reintroduction of the Legacy Roads and Trail (LRT) Act, which leverages public and private funding to address public access, water quality and protection for threatened and endangered species. We support this legislation that focuses on addressing our national backlog of deteriorating roads and trails infrastructure in order to protect our rivers, streams, endangered fish like Chinook Salmon, Bull Trout, and Steelhead Trout, and community water systems. However, over the last ten years of LRT, the USFS has been using these funds primarily to close roads and not for improving fish passage and replacing culverts on roads, that have been identified for long-term transportation needs.

CFFR is alarmed **ABOUT THE CHANGE IN FOCUS** with legacy and other funding sources that have occurred over the last ten years. Now it seems the emphasis is on closing roads, not in correcting our critically deteriorating 60-year-old infrastructure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, recreation use in the MBS NF has increased by an estimated 100-300% (a normal year average increase is 15%). Even with the U.S./Canadian border shut down, the Glacier/Mt Baker Recreational Area usage was estimated by the USFS to have increased 140% during this time. The emphasis on closing roads conflicts with the Whatcom County Recreation Plan and reduces the economic benefits of keeping these needed roads open for recreation use. There is an assumption by some people that closing roads will make these areas more like wilderness, which is not the case.

Even worse, there is also a **critical shortage in qualified, “Forest Service Certified,” engineering staff that is required to produce contracts and to administer these road repairs contracts, including replacing culverts for drainage and fish passage needs, on the MBS NF.** For example, the lack of adequate skilled staffing in the MBS NF has recently resulted in funded road contracts not being awarded. These delays have resulted in roads (such as Canyon Creek Road FSR #31 and Glacier Creek Road FSR # 39) at risk of being closed to major hiking and snowmobiling areas, due to potential catastrophic culvert failures, that likely will result in degradation to downstream aquatic resources.

We are writing to express CFFR's **urgent concerns about the lack of an adequate USFS road maintenance budget, infrastructure correction funding, and the lack of forest-certified engineering staffing required to maintain public access roads within the 1.7 million-acre MBS NF.** In 2006, the four MBS NF ranger districts in 2016 received approximately \$2.6 million for yearly road maintenance.

For the last several years including FY 2022, there was virtually **no MBS NF budget** for road maintenance and the FY 2023 budget is currently unknown. Lack of this funding, including replacement of culverts, substantially reduces recreation access and public utilization. There are recent examples following the November 2021 storm series that really stand out. This includes the loss of access on the Glacier Creek Road (FSR 39), which accesses Heliotrope Ridge Trailhead, and is projected by the MBS NF to be lost for three years. The other major access loss is on the Deadhorse Road (FSR 37), which accesses the Skyline Divide Trailhead, recognized as the third most popular hiking trail on the MBS NF, is projected to be lost for three to five years.

We strongly urge Congress to **provide adequate maintenance funding for staffing, contracting, annual maintenance dollars, and other resources, necessary to maintain these hundreds of miles of public roads on National Forest lands.** The LRT, the recent Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and other funds, could provide revenue to address the existing 60-year backlog of road maintenance for public land management agencies, such as the USFS. Agriculture Secretary Vilsack recently made clear the need to increase the USFS budget and the critical importance of maintaining the road system to provide recreation, forest management, and fire access. Legacy Road funds should be utilized to help provide adequate road maintenance and road repair on the MBS NF.

In summary, we strongly urge you to encourage Congress to provide adequate funding for staffing, contracting and other resources necessary to maintain these hundreds of miles of public roads on National Forest lands. In order to protect valuable natural resources and local recreation economic benefits, Congress should provide adequate funding for road culvert replacement (improve fish passage and hydrology), structural road prism repairs and maintenance funding reflecting the historic funding range of \$2.6 million MBS NF yearly road maintenance budget. We would be glad to provide more information or answer questions regarding this very urgent situation taking place on the MBS NF.

Sincerely,

Roger

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