

**Statement of Lenise Lago, Associate Chief,  
U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service  
Before  
House Agriculture Committee, Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry  
Regarding  
Infrastructure on National Forest System Lands  
September 26, 2019, 10:00 a.m.**

Madam Chair and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to share the Administration's position on deferred maintenance within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service.

On the National Forest System, infrastructure is the physical link between Americans and their public lands. It strengthens communities by giving them safe access to the many ecological, economic, and social amenities these lands provide. For instance, people use infrastructure on the National Forest System for ranching, farming, logging, outdoor recreation, tourism, and municipal water services, all of which support thriving small businesses, particularly in local communities. People depend on the Forest Service road network to get to schools, stores, hospitals, and homes. Perhaps most critically, forest infrastructure provides fire protection for communities. Firefighters and emergency responders use forest infrastructure to access forest lands for firefighting operations to protect communities, evacuate families from areas at risk, and rescue individuals from danger.

The infrastructure on the National Forest System includes over 370,000 miles of road, 13,400 bridges and trail bridges (see table 1), 158,000 miles of trail, nearly 500 Forest Service owned dams, over 1,100 privately owned dams overseen by the Forest Service, and facilities for both administration and wildland fire management. The roads, bridges, facilities, and other infrastructure affect every aspect of the Forest Service mission and are critical to the effective management of national forests and grasslands on behalf of the American public.

However, as a consequence of deferring maintenance in our extensive infrastructure portfolio, the state of the Forest Service's infrastructure has fallen far behind what is necessary to meet the needs of our forests and forest users. Today, the Forest Service has a deferred maintenance<sup>1</sup> backlog of more than \$5.2 billion (table 3 – Deferred Maintenance Backlog; data is also available by state).

The President's Budget for fiscal year 2020 includes a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund allocating monies for deferred maintenance on the National Forest System. USDA welcomes the opportunity for further discussion with the Subcommittee regarding the proposed fund to meet the Forest Service's deferred maintenance needs.

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<sup>1</sup> "Deferred maintenance" is the continual delay of maintenance of Forest Service infrastructure assets. Deferred maintenance prevents buildings, roads, bridges, and other assets from reaching their expected useful lifespans. The total dollar value of deferred maintenance is determined by totaling all of the work items of components and systems that need to be repaired or replaced. It does not include unforeseen failures such as a boiler leak, or a wash out of a road or bridge by a storm, etc.

Our infrastructure needs are pressing, and neglecting to meet them only makes the problem worse. Neglecting routine maintenance turns minor repairs into major-overhaul work. Ultimately, if left unchecked, it can turn critical infrastructure unusable to the point of requiring full replacement. Every delay expands deferred maintenance beyond the Forest Service’s ability to maintain our infrastructure and keep up with vital services such as fire suppression, timber production, and outdoor recreation.

Infrastructure on the national forests and grasslands also supports a rising demand for outdoor recreation. The Forest Service provides recreation opportunities in the Nation across landscapes that attract over 149 million visitors annually. According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) program, through both direct and ripple effects, National Forest visitor spending contributes over \$10 billion to the U.S. economy each year while supporting about 143,000 jobs, mostly in gateway and rural communities. Outdoor recreation and tourism are the single greatest source of jobs on the National Forest System.

Forest roads and bridges are critical for sustaining landscapes across the 193 million acres of National Forest System lands for the benefit of visitors and communities; wildland fire management also requires an extensive system of forest roads and bridges in good condition. However, the backlog of deferred maintenance for forest roads and bridges is \$3.4 billion—needed maintenance and repairs delayed until some future time.

One example of deferred maintenance impacts to Forest Service assets is the Longhouse Scenic Drive road system on the Alleghany National Forest in Pennsylvania. Wear and tear on the road is exceeding the ability for most passenger cars to reasonably travel over it. Without needed repairs, the road system cannot bring visitors from across the country to enjoy the national forest and sustain local businesses through their spending. Each year, users of the road system spend about \$1.5 million at local businesses.

**Table 1**—Roads and bridges on the National Forest System, by type and measure.

Asset Category	Number of Asset Locations	Quantity	Unit of Measure
Trail Bridges	N/A	7,156	EACH
Bridges	6,245	6,245	EACH
Roads	N/A	370,755	MILES

The Forest Service supports outdoor recreation at more than 29,000 recreation sites ranging from highly developed campgrounds, target ranges, and boating areas to minimally developed trailheads and fishing areas. Many of these sites, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps, are more than 75 years old and remain in use far beyond their expected lifespans. The deterioration

of this recreation infrastructure has a direct impact on all forest users including outfitters and guides who create jobs in forest communities and utilize recreation infrastructure for activities such as fishing and river rafting in national forests. Unless the Forest Service invests in recreation infrastructure, the quality of visitor experience will suffer and local businesses who depend on forest visitors for their livelihoods might fail.

The Forest Service manages over 158,000 miles of trails—the largest managed system of trails in the country. These trails provide motorized and nonmotorized access and high-quality recreation opportunities across the National Forest System, benefiting economies and human health in communities nationwide while also fostering extensive volunteerism and citizen stewardship. Only about 25 percent of these trails meet agency standards for safety and quality. Total maintenance across the trail system is estimated at over \$600 million, \$300 million in deferred maintenance and \$300 million in annual operational maintenance.

The Forest Service uses 40,510 USDA-owned buildings for administrative and other purposes (table 2). The buildings include facilities for research and wildland fire management as well as visitor centers, bathrooms, communications towers, living quarters, and warehouses. The Forest Service’s deferred maintenance backlog for facilities totals \$1.2 billion, about 65 percent of which is for buildings older than 50 years. Due to both age and deferred maintenance, only 57 percent of the buildings used by the Forest Service are up to standard.

The agency is taking a number of actions to help reduce deferred maintenance. For example, the Forest Service approach to travel management helps forests plan a road system that best meets community needs and transfers ownership to local communities, counties, or States where appropriate. In West Virginia, Monongahela National Forest, Red Creek Bridge at Laneville accesses 100 structures, including camps, cabins, permanent residences, mail route, etc. This bridge also accesses the Dolly Sods Wilderness, an eastern recreation destination and economic generator. The Red Creek bridge structure has been identified for much needed, significant, repairs for the past 10 years.

**Table 2**—Buildings owned by USDA and used by the Forest Service, by purpose, number, and square footage.

Asset Category	Number of Asset Locations	Quantity	Unit of Measure
Buildings	38,939	27,351,760	GSF
Residence	1,571	2,470,133	GSF

The agency is doing its part to reduce deferred maintenance. We are taking bold steps to streamline our environmental review processes and speed up important work that could help protect communities, livelihoods and resources. The proposed updates would not only give the

Forest Service the tools and flexibility to manage the land and tackle critical challenges like wildfire, insects, and disease but also improve service to the American people. Revising the rules will improve forest conditions and make it simpler for people to use and enjoy their national forests and grasslands at lower cost to the taxpayer. The revised rules will also make it easier to maintain and repair the infrastructure people need to use and enjoy their public lands—the roads, trails, campgrounds, and other facilities.

The updates will help reduce our maintenance backlog by implementing a new suite of “categorical exclusions,” a classification under NEPA excluding certain routine activities from more extensive, time-consuming environmental impact analyses. The proposed categorical exclusions would be for restoration projects, roads and trails management, recreation and facility management, as well as special use authorizations that issue permits for outfitters and guides, community organizations, civic groups and others who seek to recreate on our national forests and grasslands. The new categorical exclusions are based on intensive analysis of hundreds of environmental assessments and related data and, when fully implemented, will reduce process delays for routine activities by months or years. We are also streamlining our business practices and implementing new programmatic agreements for consultation with other agencies.

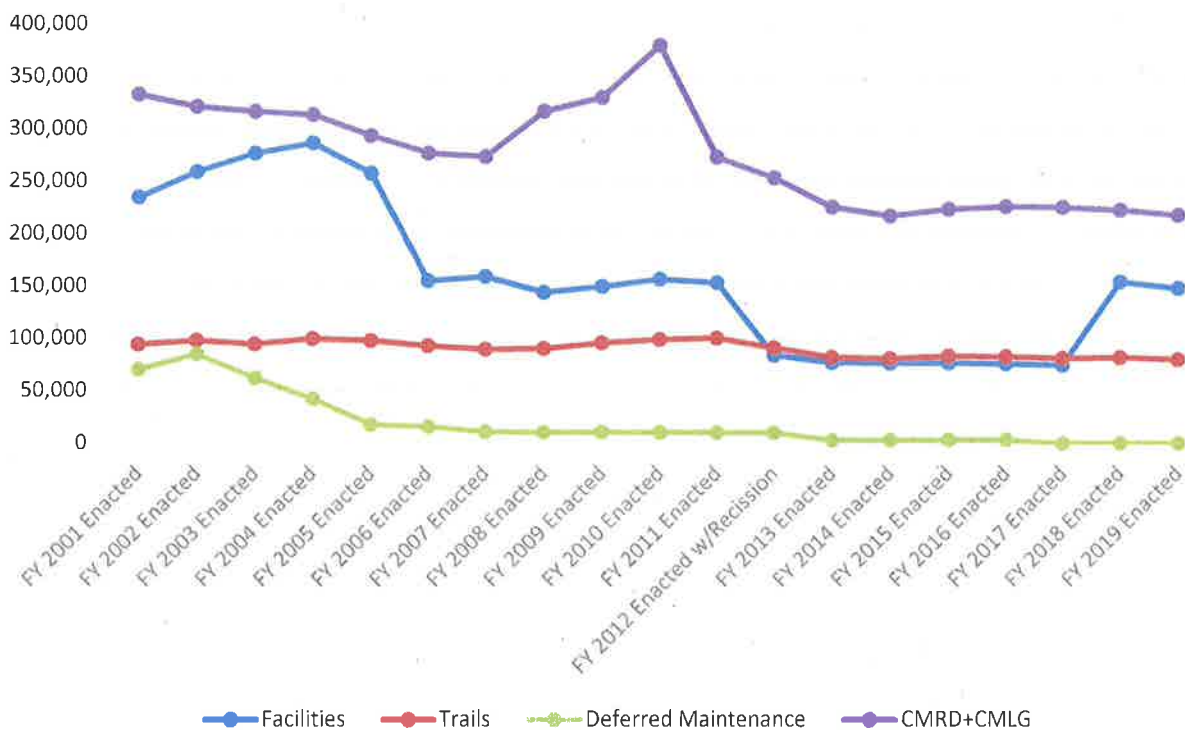
For example, this agency is specifically streamlining business practices to reduce deferred maintenance by strategically prioritizing capital improvement projects. For road projects, the agency uses the following criteria in order: (a) projects vital for near-term forest-based economic activity (that is, restoration within the next 5 years); (b) projects needed for safety; (c) projects that improve access to recreation sites and trails; and (d) projects that improve wildlife connectivity, aquatic organism passage, and flood resiliency. Projects are evaluated based on how they can provide support and infrastructure necessary to accomplish national Forest Service goals and mission areas. The goals are better community service and better access to public lands for emergency response, outdoor recreation, and active resource management. Projects are also evaluated on how they use partnerships to achieve mutual conservation goals through combined efforts.

Primary funding for Forest Service infrastructure comes from both Forest Service appropriations and from the Federal Highway Administration’s Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP). Adjusted for inflation, appropriated resources have been decreasing over the past two decades, notwithstanding a spike in funding for roads in 2010 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act of 2015 authorized a total of \$85 million in FLTP program funding for the agency for fiscal years 2016 – 2020. This amount derives from the Highway Trust Fund.

With more than \$5.2 billion in deferred maintenance, the Forest Service cannot keep much of its infrastructure on the National Forest System from deteriorating. A deteriorating infrastructure keeps us from properly managing the National Forest System. With roads in poor condition, for example, emergency vehicles have trouble getting to wildfires, undermining our firefighting and rescue capabilities. Conversely, by reducing deferred maintenance and improving infrastructure, the Forest Service would be better able to protect communities from wildfire, in part through projects to reduce hazardous fuels through prescribed fire and mechanical treatments. In addition, visitors would get better access to recreational activities and the Forest Service would

become a better neighbor by offering more opportunities for jobs and economic activity in rural areas.

The Forest Service is eager to work with the Committee to meet our infrastructure needs and reduce our deferred maintenance backlog. We are deeply committed to accomplishing our multiple-use goals for National Forest System lands, goals enshrined in our mission and in the laws of the United States, in accordance with the needs and desires of the people we serve.



**Figure 1**—Appropriations for infrastructure on the National Forest System, in thousands of dollars, fiscal years 2001–19. Adjusted for inflation, appropriations declined, despite a spike in funding for roads in (CMRD)/(CMLG) in fiscal year 2010 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. FY = fiscal year; CMRD = Capital Improvement and Maintenance—Roads program; CMLG = Legacy Roads and Trails Restoration program.

**Table 3—Forest Service Deferred Maintenance Backlog**

Asset Category	Number of Asset Locations	Quantity	Unit of Measure	Current Replacement Value	Deferred Maintenance	Facility Condition Index
Buildings	38,939	27,351,760	GSF	\$7,206,149,429	\$1,086,287,917	79
Residence	1,571	2,470,133	GSF	\$576,242,605	\$132,536,427	76
Trails	N/A	158,726	MILES	N/A	\$278,012,495	N/A
Trail Bridges	N/A	7,156	EACH	N/A	\$7,846,506	N/A
Heritage	7,046	7,046	EACH	N/A	\$17,503,549	N/A
Misc. Recreation Features	N/A	18,264	Sites	\$3,141,811,123	\$85,809,375	91
Wastewater Systems	4,736	n/a	EACH	\$162,601,900	\$29,988,070	81
Water Systems	4,710	n/a	EACH	\$321,539,254	\$85,840,039	82
Roads	N/A	370,755	MILES	\$36,789,857,403	\$3,153,000,000	N/A
Dams	497	497	EACH	\$3,914,284,327	\$79,560,275	98
Bridges	6,245	6,245	EACH	\$2,336,703,257	\$260,505,526	89
Total	63,744	30,390,582	GSF	\$54,449,189,297	\$5,216,890,180	85

Figures in the table above represent a snapshot of the Natural Resource Management (NRM) data as of June 2019 and does not represent the end of the fiscal year summary for 2018; numbers may differ slightly from the end of the fiscal year National Forest System Statistics. See individual asset tabs for more information.

\* Residence is defined as residential structures associated with the Employee Housing Program.

† Roads includes paved and unpaved roadways.

§ Not included are towers, as this program is in the midst of reevaluating assets and determining these figures.

# **Lenise Lago**

## **Associate Chief**

Lenise Lago grew up in Athens, Georgia, where she attended the University of Georgia, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Timber Management and a Master of Forest Resources from the University of Georgia's Warnell School of Forest Resources.

Lenise worked briefly in the forest products industry before joining the Forest Service in 1989. She has worked in a variety of Planning, Budget, and Resource Management jobs, splitting time between the western U.S. (16 years in Montana, Washington and Oregon), and Washington D.C. (10 years).

As Deputy Chief for the agency's Business Operations from 2011 to 2017, Lenise provided leadership and oversight for all the agency's administrative functions, including Human Resources, Information Technology, and Contracting as well as Safety, Job Corps, and Sustainable Operations. Business Operations employs more than 4,000 people and enables the work of 40,000 Forest Service employees.

After being selected to serve as Acting Associate Chief in September, 2017, Lenise was named Associate Chief in November, 2018.