

# DESCHUTES NATIONAL FOREST FEDERAL SPENDING CUTS COULD IDLE TRAIL MAINTENANCE

**BY MICHAEL KOHN**

The Bulletin

Each summer the Deschutes Trails Coalition dispatches a small crew into the forest around Bend to improve trail conditions for myriad hikers. They remove fallen trees, repair trails impacted by erosion and cut back overgrown vegetation.

But those involved with trail maintenance are increasingly worried the work relied on by both locals and visitors will soon come to a screeching halt.

Jana Johnson, executive director of the nonprofit coalition, says federal funding cuts ordered by the Trump administration will indefinitely pause trail maintenance performed by professionals. A hiring freeze for seasonal workers will only compound problems for the Forest Service.

"There's obviously a lot of staffing shortages. There have been firings. People have been leaving our federal agencies due to the current budget and offers from the current administration," said Johnson. "The public needs to know that our public lands are struggling right now."

The Deschutes Trails Coalition — in the third year of a three-year pilot project to pay for trail maintenance — was expecting a \$200,000 grant to pay for a trail crew to operate through the summer. But that funding has been cancelled, casting doubt about how the nonprofit will pay for trail maintenance in the years ahead.

The coalition planned to stretch the funding over the next three years, supplemented by grants.

"But without that \$200,000, we are just left scrambling to try to figure out how we are going to fund them," said Johnson.

Concerns that trail maintenance won't happen this year on the Deschutes and other national forests reflect broader worries that the Trump administration is sidelining environmental protections and recreation in favor of resource extraction. Executive orders are already in place to increase logging and fossil fuel extraction on public lands.

Nate Wyeth, vice president of strategy for Visit Bend, says abandoning professional trail maintenance won't go unnoticed by the public.

“Our unparalleled access to outdoor recreation is the top reason many folks visit or live in Bend, and the current federal funding crisis will undoubtedly impact trail conditions, creating a negative visitor experience,” Wyeth said.

An inquiry to the U.S. Forest Service from the Bulletin related to the disappearance of funding for trail maintenance went unanswered.

**A cyclist and hikers pause to check out Benham Falls off the Deschutes River Trail in the Deschutes National Forest on Thursday south of Bend.** Photos by Joe Kline/The Bulletin

**A cyclist rides along the Deschutes River Trail near Benham Falls in the Deschutes National Forest on Thursday**

---

Maintaining trails in national forests and other public lands has only become more challenging in recent years, due to increased demand from the public to hike and explore the outdoors. Project work has piled up due to increased use. “We already have millions of dollars of backlog of maintenance that needs to be done on our trails,” said Johnson. “So we’re just going to keep falling further behind if we don’t have crews that are working on maintenance and projects.”

While volunteer crews occasionally maintain local trails, the Deschutes Trail Coalition crew is the only paid, professional crew working on the Deschutes National Forest.

Deschutes County Commissioner Tony DeBone acknowledged that the Trump administration is tightening the purse strings, impacting groups like the trails coalition.

“These are times of action, obviously, from Washington D.C. when the dollars are stopping in different directions,” said DeBone.

“People could or need to think differently this year,” he added. “This is the time where if those resources aren’t there, what’s the next plan? Being able to open up a trail can be done in partnership with the federal government.”

DeBone suggested local organizations like the Deschutes Trail Coalition find out what is possible to accomplish.

“Volunteers can get quite a bit done,” he said.

Trail maintenance on the Deschutes National Forest usually starts in May and continues until mid-October. Johnson said there are some funds leftover from a year ago along with some new grants that can be used to get some work done at the start of the season. But the coalition’s account will be drained fairly soon, she predicts.

"We desperately need funds," Johnson said.

Courtney Braun, coowner of Wanderlust Tours in Bend, said she is anxious about what federal funding cuts mean for national forests' partner organizations and public lands.

"We feel this could impact not only the health and maintenance of the forest including trails, but could impact visitor safety without as many boots on the ground or trail maintenance," said Braun.

"This also will affect future projects of trail building that will delay some major improvements for both our community and visitors alike."

Braun said she hopes the community can "rally around" public lands and support federal employees who have been left with large funding gaps in their departments.

"We can encourage visitors to really lean into volunteering and understanding or educating themselves about the lands upon which we recreate," said Braun. "Hopefully with all of our powers combined we can still offer a high quality visitor experience. It just may look a bit different.

Approximately two dozen organizations conduct volunteer trail maintenance in Central Oregon, including:

- Sisters Trail Alliance
- Oregon Equestrian Trails
- Central Oregon Trail Alliance • Friends of the Central Cascades Wilderness
- Central Oregon Nordic Club

■ Reporter: [541-617-7818](tel:541-617-7818) , [mkohn@bendbulletin.com](mailto:mkohn@bendbulletin.com)

**Hikers walk along the Deschutes River Trail near Benham Falls in the Deschutes National Forest on Thursday.** Joe Kline/The Bulletin