

Working with the U.S. Forest Service A Guide for Trail Champions

If you live in an area with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) lands, your relationship with local land managers matters. This guide explains how to build those relationships, identifies the key players, outlines how to navigate public land management, and covers how to begin on-the-ground trail work.





Introduction: Relationships are the Foundation

Relationships with the Forest Service are built on trust, clarity, and follow-through. Start with listening.

Over half of America's natural-surface trail miles are on federal land, and the USFS manages more trail miles than any other agency in the country.

The Coffee First Philosophy

A functional working relationship is the first step on your way to getting things done and becoming influential.

- **Gather Information:** Don't guess what the agency's priorities are. Look at the Forest Plan/Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as well as the Travel Management Plan (TMP). These documents tell you exactly what the Forest Supervisor is legally bound to focus on (resource priorities and prescriptions) and where public access is focused (TMP).
- **Listen Before Talking:** Walk into a Ranger Districts office with a question: *"What are your biggest pain points this season?"* instead of a list of demands. When you understand their

constraints (budget or staffing), and you filter the information through a recreation management lens, you start building a partnership of mutual benefit and trust.

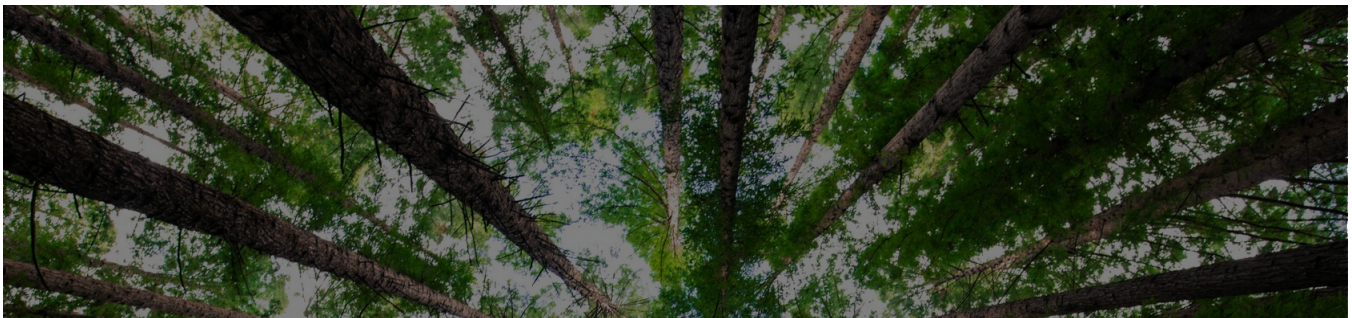
- **Become Influential:** Influence isn't about power; it's about reliability and problem solving. If you show up consistently, your information is accurate, and you help solve problems, you become the person the Ranger calls before a decision is made, not after.
- **Capacity Gap:** Most ranger districts manage hundreds of miles of trail with limited staff and shrinking budgets. Volunteers and partners are no longer nice to have; they are necessary to advance the mission. More often they seek out professional advocates to manage the volunteers as well.

Manage, Market, Mobilize

- **Manage:** Keep a list of your local district staff and know the names of their team members.
- **Market:** Share your wins and goals. If your group cleared 10 miles of trail, make sure the forest service knows. Your success is their success in a good partnership. When you have successes, link them to your clear goals.
- **Mobilize:** Turn this partnership into action. Demonstrate how tackling your goals can unlock more joint successes on the landscape.

Why Local Engagement Matters

While policy happens at the top, implementation happens at the District level. The District Ranger has the legal authority to sign off on projects. They live in the community, their kids go to the local schools, and they are the ones who actually see the land every day.






Understanding the Forest Service Structure: Know the Players

As of 2026, the USFS is undergoing a reorganization at the upper tiers of the agency. This evolving dynamic is based upon the best available information as of Spring 2026.

The Chain of Command From Policy to the Field

1	U.S. Secretary of Agriculture - <i>Department Level</i>
2	USFS Chief - <i>National Level</i>
3	State Director - <i>State Level</i>
4	 District Ranger - <i>District Level</i>
5	Recreation Planner - <i>Technical Support</i>
6	Trail Leads - <i>Field Implementation</i>

Your Primary Focus

District Ranger:

- **Their Role:** Manages a ranger district within a forest - on-the-ground operations.
- **Position:** Reports to Forest Supervisor; oversees field crews, permits/agreements, NEPA.
- **Reality:** Executes decisions; closest *decision-maker* to actual land impacts.
- **Your Role:** Get on their calendar, strive for a bi-annual meeting cadence to introduce and discuss topics of interest.

Recreation Planner

- **Their Role:** Plans recreation projects such as trails, campgrounds, access, NEPA compliance.
- **Position:** Staff specialist under Forest/District leadership.
- **Reality:** Designs what gets built/changed, but doesn't have final authority.
- **Your Role:** Get on their calendar, strive for quarterly meetings to keep a develop and maintain a strong partnership.

Trails Program Manager / Trails Lead: (monthly meetings)

- **Their Role:** Oversees trail maintenance, crews, and condition of trail systems.
- **Position:** Field/technical lead under District Ranger or Rec program.
- **Reality:** Implements work on the ground. This is often your day-to-day technical partner.
- **Your Role:** Get on their calendar, strive for monthly meetings to keep a develop and maintain a strong partnership.

Engineering or NEPA Staff:

- Engaged when projects involve new construction, reroutes, bridges, or environmental review. Meet as needed.

DISTRICT-LEVEL ROLES

FOREST AND STATE OFFICES

Secondary, but Influential

Forest Supervisor's Office: A central multi-district Forest unit

- **Forest Supervisor:**
 - **Their Role:** The top official responsible for managing a specific National Forest or Grassland unit. Oversees multiple ranger districts and their District Rangers.
 - **Position:** Reports to State Director; manages District Rangers and forest staff. Important for understanding your MTB group's purpose, value, and role.
 - **Reality:** Balances competing uses such as timber vs. recreation vs. conservation. Provides consistency across districts and can help unblock challenges.
 - **Your Role:** Get on their calendar, strive for a bi-annual meeting cadence to introduce and discuss topics of interest.

State Office: A central multi-forest office.

- **State Director:**
 - **Their Role:** Runs an entire USFS state (or multi-state) office which includes multiple forests; sets strategy, priorities, budgets.
 - **Position:** Reports to Chief's office; oversees all Forest Supervisors under their purview. Useful for complex or precedent-setting projects and for understanding your MTB group's

purpose, value and role.

- **Reality:** High-level policy, manages political pressure, resource allocation, sets tone for the forests.
- **Your Role:** Get on their calendar annually to keep strategic alignment.

- **Director of Wilderness, Heritage & Recreation -**

- **Their Role:** Implements national/state office policy for recreation, wilderness, trails, heritage resources.
- **Position:** Staff role; advises leadership like state directors.
- **Reality:** Oversees implementation of the rules.
- **Your Role:** Keep them informed to develop a partnership of trust.



Trail Champion Tip: Ask early, “*Who else should be in the room?*” and keep those folks looped in.



Navigating the Tiers of Public Land Management



While land management plans are designed for longevity, their sequential tiered structure is often not obvious and the order of planning efforts may seem off. Understanding your landscape's planning history is essential for anticipating future shifts. To successfully influence outcomes, you must understand the specific agency's hierarchy and recognize how each tier serves your mission. Effective engagement hinges on timing; you must stay plugged in to the planning cycle to ensure your voice is heard during official public comment windows. This is particularly true with the US Forest Service, where failing to submit a substantive comment during the initial phase can legally bar you from participating in subsequent objection periods. Learn more about tiers of public land management including their key function, why it matters and considerations for comments.





Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMP / RMP)

This is the highest level of planning for a specific unit, such as a National Forest or BLM Field Office. As a comprehensive and adaptive strategic document, it zones the land into management areas and defines broad land-use allocations for the next **15–30 years**.

Key Function: These plans establish the rules of the game by designating zones like Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized, which dictates what can be built there for decades. By defining where resource extraction or conflicting uses are authorized, these plans can fundamentally alter the long-term experience or quality of access in areas you may have targeted as high-priority for trails for better, or worse.

Example Plans

- Forest Service Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)/ BLM Resource Management
- County Open Space Management Plan

Why It Matters: If this plan does not allow for mechanized use (bikes) in a specific zone, a future site-specific trail proposal there will be dead on arrival.

Or if this federal area is defined as non-motorized, allowing electric-MTBs (*defined as motorized vehicles under federal regulations*) may not be possible without a plan amendment.

When Submitting Comments: Focus on articulating your broad landscape vision and responding to the manager's overarching goals. Comments should be general and goal-driven, as this stage is about balancing all competing uses of the land. Specific trail locations and design details are beyond the scope of this tier and will be addressed later in the process.



Management Unit Plans

These plans implement the high-level vision for a specific area, such as a Ranger District, a distinct landscape, or a defined management unit. While Tier 1 sets the broad goals, this stage focuses on how those goals are applied to a more localized geography.

Key Function: These plans serve to balance various competing uses including recreation, forestry, resource development, and grazing within a specific landscape. They translate broad land-use allocations into actionable strategies for the area, determining how different landscape priorities will coexist on the ground.

Example Plans

- Travel Management Plans
- Broad Recreation and Trail Management Plans
- Hazardous Fuels Reduction Plans

Why It Matters: This is where the general zoning from Tier 1 begins to take shape. Decisions made here regarding travel and resource management will determine which specific corridors are prioritized for recreation and how much space is shared with other industrial or environmental objectives.

When Submitting Comments: Focus on how recreation fits into the specific district's landscape. This is the time to advocate for general trail connectivity and to address how recreation should be balanced against other uses like timber harvests or grazing. While more focused than Tier 1, the emphasis remains on area-wide management rather than specific trail design. You should, however, provide comments on specific trails and where to locate trail development in order to articulate the specificity of trail experiences sought and why they are needed.



Site Specific Management

While higher-level plans set the vision and management unit plans implement that vision, the Site-Specific tier is the project-level action where that vision, the Site-Specific tier is where that vision becomes a reality.

This is the action level of the hierarchy, the stage where lines are drawn on the ground, dirt is moved, and ecological health is directly addressed through tangible work.

Key Function: This tier focuses on the technical, on-the-ground details of a project. It transitions from broad strategy to physical execution, determining the exact layout and impact of infrastructure. Projects at this level can be agency initiated or community driven. The public may be responding to specific agency proposed actions or community entities may be requesting the agency adopt a proposed concept trail system. With either avenue, the public vetting process will seek to ensure they meet the needs of the local landscape and users.

Example Plans

- Specific Trail Design and Construction
- Trailhead Development and Kiosk Installation
- Road or Trail Restoration and Culvert Removal

Why It Matters: This is your final opportunity to influence the physical outcome of a project. Decisions made here dictate the exact user experience, from the flow of a trail to the placement of a bridge, and ensure that environmental protections are built into the construction process.

When Submitting Comments: Focus on being specific and concrete. Because agency proposals at this stage are detail-oriented, your feedback should address exact locations, design features, and technical concerns. Unlike the higher tiers, general vision statements are less effective here; success depends on providing clear, actionable data to influence the final design.



Don't get caught up in the name, agencies call these different things. The key is: What tiered level are you operating at? Use this to focus your comments appropriately to the level you are engaged.



Trail Management



To communicate effectively with District Rangers, you need to understand how they categorize and measure trails.

TRAIL MANAGEMENT TOOLS

TRAIL MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES - TMOS

This is a technical library of design, construction, and maintenance of National Forest System trails and trail bridges. When building something, it must meet these agency-wide specs to be accepted. This trail management toolbox provides resources to understand standardized concepts for National Forest System trails.

Learn More & Explore the [USDA Forest Service Standard Trail Plans and Specifications](#)

TRAIL MANAGEMENT TOOLS

TRAIL MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES - TMOS

While all system trails within the National Forest are intended to have a Trail Management Objective (TMO), many routes on USFS lands remain non-system trails or lack documented TMOs. Non-system routes including decommissioned, unauthorized, or user-created social trails do not possess these management fundamentals.

TMOs define what the trail is, who it's for, and how it should be maintained. If you want to change a trail's use, character or accessibility, for example, you are effectively asking to update the TMO. Understanding this shifts your request from advocacy to professional collaboration.

- Intended users
- Desired experience
- Maintenance standards
- Management constraints

Learn More about [Trail Management Basics](#)



The National Strategy for a Sustainable Trail System serves as a call to action aimed at enhancing the stewardship of trails within the National Forest System. Discover more about the National Trail Strategy: [Explore the Strategy](#).



From Intent to Action: Formalizing the Partnership

These documents define the rules of engagement and ensure continuity as agency staff rotates.

Trails Master Plan: The Vision Document

The Forest Service often lacks the capacity to draft comprehensive, forward-looking trail system plans. A Trails Master Plan is frequently a stakeholder-driven document, a citizen management proposal.

This should articulate the desired future state of a trail network, including new construction, reroutes for sustainability, and decommissioning of redundant trails. Once developed by the Trail Organization, this plan should be shared with the agency to be incorporated into their formal NEPA planning cycles.

MOU and Cost Share Agreements

These are the legal anchors for your organization.

- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU):** A high-level, non-fund-obligating agreement. It defines the general roles and responsibilities of each party.
- **Challenge Cost-Share Agreement:** An agreement to jointly fund and implement projects that benefit both the USFS and a partner, such as a local trail organization. These agreements, involve matching Federal funds with partner contributions, such as cash, labor, equipment, or materials, to enhance, manage, or restore National Forest System lands.



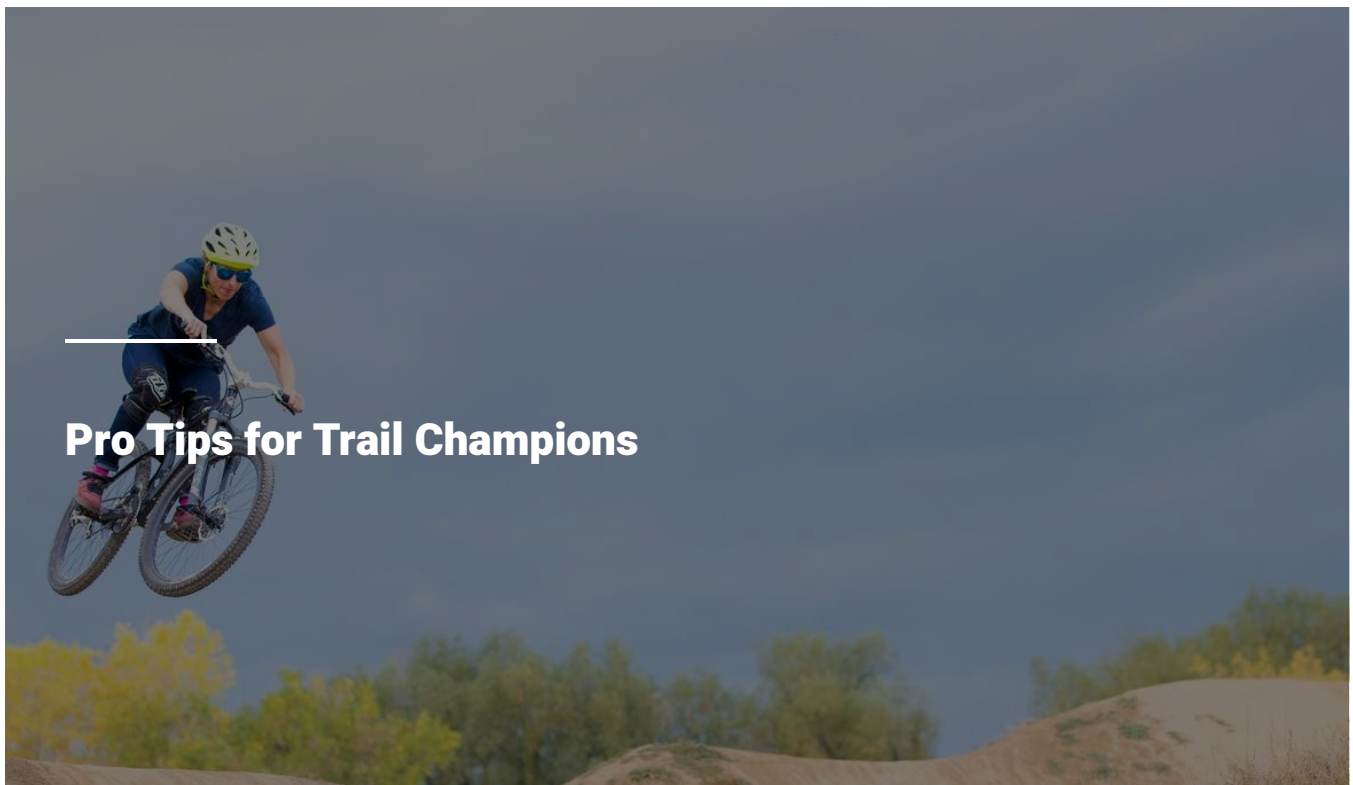
Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1992, (Pub. L. 102-154) (Challenge CostShare). This Act authorizes the Forest Service to cooperate with others in developing, planning, and implementing mutually beneficial projects that enhance Forest Service activities, where the cooperators provide matching funds or in-kind contributions. Cooperators may be public and private agencies, organizations, institutions, and individuals (FSH 1509.11, sec. 70.1).

The Operating Plan: Maintenance

The Operating Plan is an annual or multi-year document that formalizes specific maintenance standards and work schedules. Typically executed with local partners, it outlines shared responsibilities for ensuring trails remain safe, sustainable, and compliant with federal standards.

The plan defines recurring tasks, such as drainage repair and vegetation clearing, while establishing timelines and identifying necessary resources. This document clarifies the division of labor, specifying which maintenance tasks the local organization manages versus specialized or heavy-construction work retained by the agency.

This is a collaborative document typically initiated by the partner and refined by agency staff. While the trail organization often proposes the specific scope of work based on their field capacity, the Forest Service ensures the plan aligns with federal Trail Management Objectives (TMOs), safety standards, and environmental protections. This joint drafting process ensures that the partner's boots on the ground expertise is matched with the agency's technical and legal requirements.



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- **Start local:** The District Ranger and Trails Lead are your anchors.
 - **Think long-term:** Relationships outlast individual projects.
 - **Be a problem-solver,** not just an advocate.
 - **Document everything,** success builds momentum.
 - **Remember:** Trust is the real currency.

Additional Resources from the USFS

1

Mountain Bike advocates should be familiar with the [Reimagine Recreation](#) initiative. This is a strategic planning effort designed to outline the future of recreational activities on lands overseen by the USDA Forest Service, while tackling existing challenges and meeting emerging opportunities.

2

[Volunteer and Partnership Agreements](#): The central hub for finding local contacts, partnership opportunities, and grant information

3

[USFS Volunteer Guidebook](#): This is the Owner's Manual for your partnership. It covers the paperwork like Volunteer Agreements and the Dos and Don'ts.

4

[Trail Maintenance and Construction Notebook](#): Highly illustrated and guides the physical act of building and maintaining trails to Forest Service standards.

5

Learn more about [accessibility](#) guidelines while working in the US Forest Service and access the [Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines](#).



Related Content

Starter Guide to Funding

VIEW

Common Barriers in Trail Development

[VIEW](#)

Trail Audience: A Community Guide to Collaboration

[VIEW](#)

Thank you to **IMBA Subject Matter Experts** who contributed to the content of this course: Aaron Clark, Todd Keller, Mary Monroe Brown

Course Development by Joanna Fetherolf



IMBA Trail Development Process

Access



[Contact IMBA](#) if there's a specific part of the process that has your community's trail journey stuck – we probably know some trail champions who have overcome the same challenges through creative solutions.
