

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
Committee on Natural Resources

**Organization:** National Forest Foundation  
**Name:** Dieter Fenkart-Froeschl, President & CEO  
**Title of Hearing:** All in for America250: Public-Private Partnerships Supporting America's Semiquincentennial on our Public Lands  
**Date of Hearing:** February 10, 2026 at 10:15am

**National Forest Foundation Overview**

The National Forest Foundation (NFF) was chartered by Congress in 1990 to serve as the official national nonprofit partner of the U.S. Forest Service. NFF accelerates on-the-ground stewardship by bringing together public and private capital, community partners, and implementation capacity to restore and enhance America's 193-million acres of National Forests and Grasslands.

Our vision is a world where caring for forests is second nature, and our mission is to transform America's love of nature into action for our National Forests. Our work centers on three pillars: wildfire resilience, land and watershed restoration, and recreation enhancements.

We are national in scope, local in practice, and generational in impact. This means we bring national resources to support active forest management on the ground, partner closely with local communities and contractors, and deliver projects that reduce wildfire risk, restore working landscapes, and strengthen rural economies for decades to come. In doing so, we treat more acres to improve wildfire resilience and invest more in National Forest recreation infrastructure than any other nonprofit organization.

In 2025, NFF advanced 400+ projects across 100 national forests and deployed \$115M in impact via our team of 170+ staff in 44 states. Over the last 20 years, we have leveraged our annual appropriations with private philanthropy at a ratio of 6:1 and completed 4,300+ projects, delivering meaningful results on the ground:

- **56 million trees** planted across 50+ National Forests,
- **1.9 million acres** treated to reduce the risk of wildfire in communities across the country,
- **1 million acres** revitalized through watershed restoration and wildlife habitat projects, and
- **41,000+ miles** of trails improved, enhancing the recreation experiences for over 170 million annual visitors to our National Forests.

**National Forests: An American Legacy**

One of America's most enduring ideas took shape in the late 1800s, when the United States made a bold decision to set aside public lands for everyone. At the time, it was a radical idea. In much of the world, land was held by the few. In America, it would belong to the people.

As the nation grew and industrialized, unchecked extraction threatened not only the land but the nation's long-term prosperity. In response, Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, establishing forests that would be actively managed to provide clean water, sustainable timber, healthy wildlife, and resilient communities. From that vision emerged the National Forest System and the U.S. Forest Service, creating a uniquely American model that balances conservation with working landscapes for the common good.

Today, National Forests remain one of America's most enduring ideas. They belong to every American, regardless of income, geography, or political affiliation. They are places where freedom

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
Committee on Natural Resources

is lived through action; where Americans explore and work, hunt and fish, gather with family and friends, and find both solitude and belonging.

At their core, National Forests reflect a deeply American love of adventure and exploration, offering space to recreate, to discover, and to connect with something larger than ourselves.

**Celebrating National Forests**

National Forests not only have a powerful legacy; they are essential to America's future. Eighty-seven percent of Americans agree that conserving our National Forests is both critical to the nation's long-term success and a responsibility we owe to the next generation.

From clean water to unforgettable outdoor experiences, National Forests are true work-horses. They sequester 20 percent of the carbon removed from the atmosphere, produce the oxygen we rely on, and provide drinking water to one-third of American households. They are also powerful economic engines. National Forests contribute \$15 billion to the U.S. economy each year, support hundreds of rural and gateway communities, supply sawtimber to mills that sustain local jobs, and offer recreation opportunities to more than 170 million visitors annually.

As America celebrates its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we are called to reflect not only on the places and stories that shaped our nation, but on those that will carry its values forward. Few public landscapes embody the ideals of freedom, democracy, and exploration more powerfully than our National Forests and Grasslands. They represent America at its best: open, shared, and defined by possibility.

In this moment of reflection and renewal, Americans are seeking places where our national identity can be experienced, not just remembered. National Forests are where freedom is exercised through action, where exploration remains accessible to all, and where the great American story continues to unfold.

Yet too often, these lands are overlooked. In America's 250<sup>th</sup> year and beyond, NFF is elevating the relevance, visibility, and critical importance of National Forests and Grasslands as central to who America is and who we aspire to be.

**Celebrating America250 Through Action**

The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our nation is more than a moment in time. It is a moment of resolve and an opportunity to renew our commitment to the long-term vitality of the places that define America.

As we look toward America250, NFF believes this commemoration is best honored through continued action. By sustaining and strengthening investments already underway in our National Forests and Grasslands, we can ensure these lands serve future generations long after the anniversary has passed. Our work is guided by two priorities: **active forest management** and sustained investment in **recreation and human health**.

These efforts are not short-term initiatives. They represent generational commitments that build on decades of partnership and progress. By continuing to invest with intention and consistency, we protect communities, strengthen rural economies, and ensure our public lands remain resilient, accessible, and thriving for the next 250 years.

### **Active Forest Management**

NFF's first priority is a sustained commitment to active forest management. Today, more than 60 million acres of our National Forests require treatment for wildfire mitigation. This backlog is the result of a century of well-intended but incomplete forest management practices that focused on suppressing all fire, rather than recognizing the difference between fire that restores forest health and fire that devastates communities.

Investing in active management is one of the greatest gifts we can give future generations. It means safer forests, healthier landscapes, and stronger resilience to wildfire. As the nonprofit organization that treats more acres to improve wildfire resilience than any other, NFF is helping translate that principle into action on the ground.

And the economics are clear. Direct wildfire suppression costs the federal government billions of dollars every year, and the long-term economic damage from wildfires drives the true cost even higher. Treating this backlog through prevention and restoration costs roughly \$2,000 per acre, reflecting the complexity and volume of biomass and small-diameter trees that must be removed. Once treated, however, an acre can remain resilient for 10 to 20 years and can be maintained with low-intensity prescribed fire at an average cost of just \$100 to \$200 per acre.

This is the return on active forest management. Investing early, investing wisely, and investing for the long term reduces risk, lowers costs, and protects both communities and landscapes.

### **Recreation and Human Health**

The second priority is investing in National Forests and Grasslands as engines of recreation and human health.

These are the places where Americans reconnect with nature, restore their well-being, and recharge their spirits. They are also economic lifelines for rural communities, supporting jobs, small businesses, and local economies that depend on outdoor recreation and tourism. As the nonprofit organization that invests more in National Forest recreation infrastructure than any other, NFF plays a unique role in turning access and opportunity into lasting local impact.

In recent years, NFF has worked in close coordination with the U.S. Forest Service to leverage Legacy Restoration Funds to turn deferred maintenance into lasting infrastructure improvements.

On the Mt. Hood National Forest in Oregon, for example, the Forest Service partnered with NFF to rebuild and reopen the Trillium Lake boardwalk. This 850-foot boardwalk allows visitors to safely circumnavigate one of the most visited sites in the state while protecting sensitive wetland environments and wildlife around the lake. The roughly \$1 million project was completed with 65 percent of the funding from Legacy Restoration Funds and 45 percent from non-federal sources raised by NFF.

In Arizona, the Tonto National Forest and NFF used Legacy Restoration Funds to restore the Highline Trail, a historic segment of the Arizona Trail in the Payson Ranger District. Approximately \$121,000 in LRF funds and \$180,000 in other federal funds were leveraged with \$616,000 raised from local and national businesses, user groups, and municipalities to restore and improve the sustainability of 60 miles of scenic trail that had been heavily eroded by steep original grades and past fires.

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
Committee on Natural Resources

Completed this year, the trail can now support long-term use by hikers, mountain bikers, and horseback riders. As a premier recreation destination, the Highline Trail is helping put Payson, Arizona on the map as a recreation hub while strengthening the local economy and fostering partnerships that continue to support additional recreation infrastructure across the region.

**American 250 and Forests250**

As part of America's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Forest Service will lead Forests250, a national outreach and education initiative that highlights the role of forests and natural resources in our shared history and future. The initiative invites Americans to engage through storytelling, local events, and hands-on service, including ambassador commitments and community activities across the country. At its core, Forests250 is about civic connection, bringing people together to care for lands we all own.

Through Forests250, NFF will amplify America250's signature national programs, build partnerships and storytelling that extend well beyond 2026, and celebrate National Forests through a bold investment of \$250 million in wildfire resilience, \$250 million in land and watershed restoration, and \$250 million in recreation over the next five years.

Alongside its day-to-day work in communities nationwide, NFF will focus additional resources on two major tentpole moments. The first is in June, when we will mark the 8<sup>th</sup> annual National Forest Week. The second is the holiday season, centered on the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony and Whistlestop Tour.

**Summer 2026 Campaign: American Adventure**

Summer is when many Americans connect most deeply with their public lands, and National Forests sit at the center of that experience. Each year, more than 170 million people visit our National Forests, a number projected to grow to 250 million within the next decade.

Summer is also the moment when the full range of what National Forests offer comes to life. These lands provide extraordinary recreation opportunities, often with greater access and freedom than National Parks and other public lands, yet they remain widely overlooked or misunderstood.

Through that lens, the summer of 2026 represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for NFF to elevate, celebrate, and reintroduce Americans to the National Forests and Grasslands that belong to them. NFF will bring this sense of adventure forward this summer, activating freedom, exploration, and connection by putting National Forests back at the center of the American experience.

**National Forest Week**

The 8<sup>th</sup> annual National Forest Week, taking place May 31 through June 6, will kick off the summer with a coordinated series of events, activations, and public awareness moments designed to harness the American sense of adventure and inspire exploration of National Forests. From local, on-the-ground events with community partners to national media moments, the week will invite Americans to get outside, rediscover their National Forests, and share their own experiences and stories.

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
Committee on Natural Resources

Throughout June, AMC Theatres nationwide will run NFF's summer-themed public service announcement before every feature film, featuring several iconic American brands. Together, these brands and National Forests evoke the wide-open road and the uniquely American spirit of adventure and exploration, inviting audiences to rediscover the freedom and possibility found across National Forests.

***The Great American Farmers Market***

Later in the summer, NFF will amplify the Great American Farmers Market as a national moment focused on wildfire resilience and active forest management. With Smokey Bear in attendance, the emphasis will be on shared responsibility and the actions communities can take to reduce wildfire risk nationwide.

This moment will also highlight NFF's leadership as the federal government's largest partner in wildfire resilience. To date, NFF has completed 1.9 million acres of wildfire resilience treatments, complementing the 3.3 million acres of hazardous fuels reduction completed by the U.S. Forest Service last year alone.

Looking ahead and fueled by investments from multiple corporate partners as well as state and local governments, NFF will accelerate this work by treating tens of thousands of backlogged acres, increasing the resilience of millions of acres of forest, protecting hundreds of communities, and supporting the Forest Service in advancing the National Active Forest Management Strategy. These efforts will boost forest productivity, strengthen rural economies, and increase timber volume by 25 percent to reach 4 billion board feet annually by fiscal year 2028, levels not seen since 1993.

***Rural Communities and Local Economies***

During the summer of 2026, NFF will also highlight National Forests as engines of rural vitality and local economies, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs through outdoor recreation, timber, and grazing.

That impact is already being felt through significant private-sector investment across the National Forest System. Leading outdoor recreation manufacturers have committed a combined eight-figure investment to improve recreation infrastructure nationwide, while a seven-figure investment from the Rasmuson Foundation is restoring multiple iconic cabins in Alaska that deliver world-class recreation experiences. Investments like these demonstrate the scale of private-sector commitment to National Forests and the tangible economic benefits flowing to local jobs and communities.

This momentum makes something clear: conservation and economic opportunity go hand in hand. It also shows why sustained federal investment matters, because private dollars move fastest and farthest when public commitment is clear and reliable. Moreover, investments like these show that private partnerships can leverage public dollars to create a margin of excellence in our public lands.

To date, \$1.1 billion of the \$1.3 billion Legacy Restoration Fund has already been delivered. Reauthorizing the program during America's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday would send a clear national signal that public lands and the communities that depend on them are worth sustained investment. Reauthorization would extend the program for seven years and increase funding to \$2 billion

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
Committee on Natural Resources

annually, addressing 30 percent of the \$10 billion maintenance backlog across National Forests while advancing the Forest Service’s ability to deliver world-class recreation experiences.

Taken together, these activations transform the summer of 2026 into more than a celebration, making it a moment of shared action that sets the course for healthier forests, stronger communities, and a renewed commitment to America’s National Forests for another 250 years.

**Winter 2026 Campaign: Shared Traditions**

Winter is when forests live most vividly in the American imagination, woven into holiday traditions, snow-covered landscapes, and the simple act of gathering with family and friends. It is the season of winter recreation and shared experiences, from snow sports to quiet moments outdoors, when forests offer both adventure and reflection. In 2026, NFF will tap into that deep seasonal connection through a series of high-impact winter activations, developed in close collaboration with partners across the country.

Central to this effort is a renewed focus on storytelling that meets people where they are during the holidays. In parallel, NFF is exploring a partnership with a major media company to produce a National Forest-themed holiday film, bringing the story of America’s forests into homes across the country during the 2026 holiday season through heartfelt, inspiring storytelling that reflects the values of stewardship, connection, and shared responsibility across generations.

***Christmas Trees and Reforestation***

The season will begin by celebrating and amplifying Christmas markets across the country and the traditions they represent. Each year, more than 300,000 Americans harvest a Christmas tree from a National Forest, an affordable, family-centered tradition that directly supports forest stewardship. In 2026, NFF will build on that connection by inspiring even more families to participate, while also elevating the urgent need to reforest millions of acres of National Forests to sustain healthy watersheds, wildlife habitat, and resilient ecosystems.

Today, the reforestation backlog across National Forests totals approximately four million acres, representing roughly 1.2 billion trees and an estimated \$6 billion investment at about \$5 per tree. Progress is accelerating. In the past year alone, the U.S. Forest Service and its partners achieved the highest level of reforestation in 25 years, restoring 285,000 acres. NFF is proud to have contributed by completing its campaign to plant 50 million trees on National Forests most in need.

Throughout the season, NFF will also highlight the full reforestation lifecycle it is working to strengthen, from reducing bottlenecks in seed collection and nursery capacity to scaling site preparation, planting, and long-term monitoring needed to ensure forests thrive for generations.

***Winter Recreation***

Winter exploration will continue through a partnership with National Ski Areas Association, inviting Americans to extend their spirit of adventure into the colder months. National Forests are foundational to winter recreation in the United States. More than one-quarter of the nation’s ski resorts operate on National Forest land, placing world-class skiing and snow sports within some of the most iconic and beloved landscapes in the country.

That connection is reflected in strong public support. Through NFF’s Ski Conservation Fund, ski customers have contributed nearly \$14 million in donations for conservation and recreation

## **U.S. House of Representatives**

### Committee on Natural Resources

projects on National Forests, including \$1.2 million raised in 2025 alone, with Vail Resorts serving as a principal sponsor. At the same time, ski areas operating on National Forest System lands generate approximately \$55 million annually in permit fees to the U.S. government, underscoring the economic importance of these partnerships.

Together, these ski areas demonstrate how deeply National Forests are woven into America's winter recreation economy and culture. To bring that connection even closer to people, NFF is also working to transform select airport lounges into immersive urban forest spaces, filled with greenery that evokes the natural cathedrals of our National Forests. These spaces are designed to reduce stress while traveling and to remind millions of travelers of the relevance, accessibility, and shared ownership of National Forests.

### ***U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree***

The season will culminate with the epic journey of the U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree. Traveling more than 2,000 miles from the American West to Washington, D.C., the tree will serve as a moving symbol of connection, community, and shared stewardship. Along the way, NFF will partner with the Society of American Foresters and the U.S. Forest Service to celebrate the tree at stops across the country during its whistlestop tour.

Working alongside iconic American brands, NFF will create moments of community gathering and national pride at each stop, spotlighting the forests, towns, and people that define the journey. Together, these winter activations will turn the holiday season into a time of renewed connection, reminding Americans that our National Forests are not just symbols of winter, but living landscapes that sustain communities and deserve long-term care and investment.

### **Conclusion**

Together, these summer and winter activations represent far more than a celebration of America's 250th anniversary. They are a call to action rooted in stewardship, shared pride, and possibility. From road trips and recreation to wildfire resilience, reforestation, and rural economic vitality, the National Forest Foundation is harnessing once-in-a-generation national attention to drive lasting investment in forests that endure and communities that thrive.

As the only national organization solely focused on improving the health and accessibility of our National Forests and Grasslands, NFF is uniquely positioned to turn cultural moments into measurable outcomes. Working at national scale alongside nationwide partners, local communities, corporate partners, and private funders, NFF is restoring forests, strengthening local economies, and reconnecting Americans with the public lands that belong to them.

America250 and Forests250 will not be marked by reflection alone, but by action, ensuring our National Forests and Grasslands remain healthy, accessible, and resilient for the next 250 years and beyond.