

David Page:

Hey, welcome back to Trail Break Radio, the Winter Wildlands Alliance podcast. I'm David Page. We're in the midst of a nine-part series bringing you the compelling conversations presented during our 10th biennial grassroots advocacy conference held this past September at CU Boulder's Mountain Research Station at the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park. The conference, produced by Winter Wildlands Alliance every two years, was sponsored this year by Outdoor Alliance, Mighty Arrow Foundation, and REI.

Today we're delving into the somewhat wonky, but nevertheless essential topic of sustainable recreation planning on public lands. We're joined by a panel of experts who are deeply involved in translating national-level outdoor recreation policies into on-the-ground solutions that benefit both the environment and outdoor enthusiasts. What is sustainable recreation anyway, and how do we write it into land management policy in a way that actually makes a difference on the ground?

Hilary Eisen excerpt:

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David Page:

Our panel of experts, including Jamie Irvin from Outdoor Alliance, Sam Ryder from the United States Forest Service, and Hilary Isen from Winter Wildlands Alliance, unravel the challenges and opportunities in bridging the gap between high-level directives and on-the-ground actions in public lands management, emphasizing the critical role of strategic planning, partnerships, advocacy, and community engagement. So, click into your skis, put on your walking shoes, or just sit back with your favorite beverage and join us as we navigate the intricate landscape of recreation, policy, and conservation.

David Page: Okay, welcome to session two, panel two. Very exciting panel on sustainable recreation and planning, which is sometimes hard to stomach or think about, but it's super important as we look forward and deal with all these things that we're dealing with. One quick call for if anybody's got double A batteries up here on the mountain, I will pay a large sum or trade a beer with you or whatever to avoid having to go back down to Ned for more batteries eventually. This thing is just chewing through batteries. Cool. Yeah, so sustainable recreation planning. I just wanted to sort of open it up with an anecdote from my local forest. I'm surrounded by the Inyo National Forest in California. My new friend Jaime here is from Friends of the Inyo and we were just chatting before this and we've got, it's just interesting from a local perspective. We have two planning efforts going on right now. One, Jaime and I were both at this, it was really basically a planning charrette, like super long range, towns to trails project, they're calling it. It's got some money from the state and it's all planning money and it's really abstract. It's just can we create a trail that goes from north to south, three counties, along the front of, along the eastern edge of the Sierra and they're running all kinds of computer modeling, like which roads are best. They want to use existing infrastructure and tie it all together. But we had, there was a little public meeting and people start asking, well, what kind of trail is it? Well, we don't know. What kind of trail do you want? is it a motorized trail or not? Well, do you want it

to be motorized? Can horses go on it? Well, probably on some sections. I mean, so super abstract. I mean, it seems like a really neat idea. Like, but is it a bike path? Is it a soft surface trail? Is it an ATV trail? Is it a side-by-side trail? So that's one end of planning, like super conceptual, you know, great ideas. Eventually, maybe it makes it all the way through NEPA and gets implemented. On the other end of the spectrum, we just saw the proposed action on our over snow vehicle plan for the Inyo. Which is, you know, the beginning of a short-ish NEPA project to determine where over snow vehicles are allowed and not allowed on that forest. So much more tangible. And, you know, the end of that project will be designations on the ground with real world consequences for recreation on that forest. So it's kind of two different things. And either way, it's really hard to mobilize people to engage because it seems, it's like, oh yeah, you know, I don't know. I mean, like once there's, you know, a bulldozer at your door, people start to rally. But when you say, hey, we might have bulldozers in 15 years raising your front stoop, people don't really get that motivated. So that's part of what we're gonna talk about today.

So that's part of what we're gonna talk about today. But I just wanted to kick it off with that. If we could just do a quick round of introductions, each of you just tell me who you are, who you work for, what you work on, where you live. And then we'll get into it. We can start with you, Jamie, again. Just give it quick.

Jamie Ervin:

Well, it's just some last panel, but I'm Jamie Ervin, Policy Associate at Outdoor Alliance. And work primarily on national policy, but a little bit on forest planning. And yeah, pass it on.

Sam Rider:

Hey there, Sam Rider, National Recreation Planner for the Forest Service. I live just down in Evergreen, although I do work for the WO. They let me sit out here, which is pretty nice. I had an interesting path to finally making it into a land management agency, joined the Forest Service in 16, fall of 16. Before that, I was doing planning work for the Marine Corps. And before that, after going to school in the DC area, started my career there doing rec planning for FERC, doing analysis of impacts to rec, boating, fishing, all that good stuff from hydropower licensing projects.

David Page:

Okay, so Sam, I gotta call you out on a couple acronyms, just for the sake of the broader public. WO, Washington Office, right? FERC, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission?

Sam Rider:

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Best acronym in the government. I'm an ex-FERC-er.

David Page:

Nice.

Hilary.

Hilary Eisen:

Cool.

Hi, everybody, Hilary Eisen. I'm the policy director with Winter Wildlands Alliance. I work with a lot of the people in the room here, so it's great to see everybody. And I am up in Bozeman, Montana, and coming up on 10 years with Winter Wildlands pretty soon here. And when I started, I didn't know anything about travel planning. And now I know more about travel planning than I ever wanted to know. But before that, I'd worked for other conservation organizations on forest planning and BLM planning, Bureau of Land Management Planning. So long history in my career of doing land management planning for conservation and recreation.

David Page:

Nice..Okay, so Sam, I'm gonna kick it off with you, since you're the resident planning expert, and dealing with, what is it, 193 million acres of public land in the Forest Service? Something like that. Something like that, maybe over that for a certain number of acres of private land that the Forest Service also manages. What is sustainable recreation? What is sustainable recreation planning? And then, where do visitor use planning and travel management planning fit into the whole scheme?

Sam Rider: Yeah, for sure. First, I just wanted to start off with some gratitude for being here. Any opportunity to come to be in a professional setting where the expectations for showering are low, and the number of people wearing hats is high, count me in. So anyway, and last night, the speakers last night were incredible. So thank you very much. Okay, so yeah, I'm here from the Forest Service government perspective of what is sustainable recreation? How does the Forest Service think about sustainable recreation? So kind of originated out of the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, which kind of came up in the late 80s, early 90s, and got some global attention of, oh, wow, we're building all of this stuff we should probably think about now, but make sure we think about the future as well. Especially as all nations and communities and everything, we're experiencing the benefits of tourism and recreation and all that good stuff, but also experiencing the negative impacts to the environment as well. So that's kind of the root of it. And then moving forward, sustainable recreation and the Forest Service, those conversations started before my time around early 2000s, and then in 2010, folks were working on the framework for sustainable recreation. Some of you may have heard of this document, some not. It's kind of sneaky in that way, I guess. I don't know really how widely it was circulated. So there are six principles to sustainable recreation in that document. I got a cheat sheet here because I often blank on a couple of them if I do it by memory. And a lot of these foundational principles, they've been talked about already in the first panel. So one, connecting people with natural heritage, cultural heritage, and building that sense of stewardship, those relations that were talked about last night. Two, promoting benefits and long-term outcomes from opportunities as opposed to those, focusing on those short-term outputs. And benefits, we're talking about benefits to communities, benefits to individuals. Three, integration. First panel talked a lot about how important that is. So that's a big one. Being system-focused and not so siloed as things often are. Four, again, also touched on how

important it is to engage and collaborate across sectors, across boundaries, public, partners. And really, for me, that comes down to building relationships, pushing through whatever fear that the past has built, and creating trust so that you truly can collaborate. Number five, that all-lands approach again, considering the broader landscape, and not just one little site, one little area, but the landscape as a whole. And the last foundational principle in that framework for sustainable recreation, it hits on the three interconnected spheres of sustainability, economic, ecological, and social. And trying to always hit the sweet spot of those circles that's gonna look different depending on where you are, when you are, what's going on. All right, so that's 2010, right? So about the same time, the 2012 planning rule, which superseded the 82 planning rule, so for forest planning, stepped on the scene. And it's my understanding that the 82 rule kind of touched on what you should put into forest plans in terms of recreation, but nothing was really codified, and certainly not the concept of sustainable recreation. So what the 2012 planning rule did was create a definition for what we mean by sustainable recreation. So I guess to answer your question, that definition is the set of recreation settings and opportunities on the national forest system that is ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable for present and future generations. And along with that definition, it created some musts that planners need to put in forest plans when they're revising plans under the 2012 rule. Again, has that definition, and it also sets forth a requirement to consider and establish desired recreation settings across the landscape using recreation opportunity spectrum. Now, ROS, recreation opportunity spectrum, not the best, you know, I'll say it. It's not the end all be all, but folks wanted to use that system because it had been around since the 80s or maybe before folks were familiar. And again, it was a way to really get recreation a seat at the table in planning. Think that's all I got, unless I didn't hit something.

David Page: No, that's great, that's great. That gives us a good place to start. So I'm gonna kick it over to Jamie now. Speaking of integration, speaking of 2012 planning rule and revised plans, Jamie and I worked together on the Sierra and Sequoia forest plan revisions, and these were two early adopter forests in California under that planning rule. And I just wanted, Jamie, if you could, just talk a little bit about OA's approach to planning, what's been, you know, how do we collectively advocate for integration? How's that worked out so far? If you have any anecdotes from the Sierra, Sequoia you wanna share, go for it.

Jamie Ervin: Sure, folks are generally familiar with forest planning. Yeah, we don't need to, okay. So go ahead and give a 30 seconds on what it is. We revised forest plans every 15 years. 30. It's more like every 30 or 40. There's a 2012 planning rule that guides how it's done that has a lot of good stuff in it about how to address recreation and ecological sustainability and other stuff. But this is, you know, sort of like in any other planning process, but for national forests, where are we gonna allow certain activities? What are the goals for what we're doing on the forest?

What are the desired, like what do we want the forest to look like and how are we gonna get there? So all of us have worked a bunch on that stuff. So for Outdoor Alliance, I'll just give the caveat right off that I don't do a ton of OAs planning, forest planning work, but it's something that

we're deeply engaged in. And I worked a lot with David on the Sierra, Sequoia in the Southern Sierra Nevada. But we're a national organization, right? Outdoor Alliance is 10 member groups. Our actual staff is pretty small. There's only like eight of us, I think. But the full coalition is pretty robust. I mean, some of the organizations like Winter Wildlands, especially, but Surf Rider, some of these groups are pretty big, pretty established. So the network is big, even though it's a small staff. And we have people representing the member organizations or just members in these communities near the national forests around the country. So we view our role at OA as to like make sure, like kind of lead the charge in terms of national policy, keep track of which forest plans are happening, what is the policy guidance on how they should come together, what national policy initiatives might relate to forest planning. But then we leave the local work to people that actually live in these areas and really know the forests. And so we'll have local coordinators of some sort or more than one of them usually working on a forest plan revision. And Hillary and David have both played that role for OA of kind of representing the broader recreation community while also representing backcountry skiers. And so for the 20, the forests that initially underwent plan revisions following the 2012 planning rule, we call those the early adopters. OA has been really involved in a bunch of those forests. The forests that came right out of the gate are ones that are super valuable for recreation, right? Like around here, there's the Grand Mesa, El Compadre, am I saying that right? Western Slope, Colorado. I worked a lot in Southern Sierra. I live now near the Pisgah and Anahala, that was another one. And so we've gone through over a decade now of kind of learning how the planning rule works. And it's taken that long to revise some of these forest plans. Like the Sierra Sequoia one that I worked on was just completed I think last year after starting in 2013 or 2014. So this has been a big long-term thing, a lot of collaboration, a lot of learning alongside the Forest Service and how to do this. And we are kind of in the process, honestly, of like reflecting on what that investment has resulted in and like how we can maybe do it better as more forests go down that path. But without, let's see, I wrote, David asked about Sierra Sequoia. I mean, I think in that plan, I worked not for OA but with a conservation group on like developing this collaborative vision for addressing recommended wilderness and like how can we design wilderness designations in a way that also supports mountain bike access and recreation access. And that was not ultimately adopted by the Forest Service, but it was a good community building and was included as an alternative in the plans. I think generally for some of these, David asked, you asked about integration. I think there's a sustainable recreation section of a forest plan, right? And I think one theme of our comments on every forest planning thing I've written is that we wanna see recreation integrated into every part of a plan where it's applicable. Just like in the last conversation, we don't want recreation to just sit over on its own. Like these plans are an opportunity to make sure that we can think about how to address recreation through our aquatics program, through fire and fuels and through other things that go on the forest. And yeah, I might leave it there. And then you can talk more about, we're doing this audit of like our forest planning program right now and I can share some insights from that.

David Page: Nice, thanks, Jamie. Okay, so I'll kick it over to Hillary. As you say, you know more than you ever wanted to know, hope to know about travel management. I would say you're probably the world's foremost expert on subpart C travel planning. Can you tell us what is travel

management? How does it relate to the kind of planning that Sam and Jamie are talking about? And how can we get involved as a backcountry ski community or how does it impact us?

Hilary Eisen: Yeah, and before I get to travel planning, I wanna step back just a second. Jamie and Sam both talked about integration and Sam mentioned how there's the recreation opportunity spectrum and Jamie talked about how we wanna see recreation integrated through a whole forest plan. And last night during Pete's talk and he had this one image that actually like kind of is how I imagine the ROS in a forest plan. And so I don't know if you remember, but there was an image of the Colorado, I think it's probably the Delta. The river is totally dry, but you could see all the tendrils of the tributaries and the main stem and then it was really contrasted with the surrounding. And I think of the ROS as that river that flows through a forest plan. I will clarify that by saying very few forest plans have achieved this vision of mine, but I think that the ideal is that the ROS, the recreation opportunity spectrum is this river that flows through a forest plan and it has all these little tributaries that go in to the other elements, so into timber management and kind of fire and some of the stuff that the previous panel was talking about, into grazing, into the minerals program, into all the things the Forest Service does because across it all, you have people on the forest that are recreating and the way the majority of the public interacts with the forest is through outdoor recreation one way or another. And so the recreation opportunity spectrum sets this vision for desired future conditions of okay, in this part of the forest, we want it to be primitive and here's what primitive means and maybe that's different in the winter versus the summer and so we're gonna develop a winter definition and a summer definition and then the next step is semi-primitive. Is that semi-primitive motorized or non-motorized? And then next is roaded natural and that's where you start to get into kind of this landscape where you have dirt roads, Forest Service system roads that are then nodules to those more semi-primitive landscapes that lead to those primitive landscapes and then the next step down from that or up from that, however you're looking at it, is rural and that's usually around ski areas or like cabin developments. There's also urban but there's not very many urban settings on a national forest. The Wasatch might be an exception and Chelsea here could speak to the urban nature of the Wasatch National Forest. But so that's the ROS and it's in a forest plan. It's this really big picture. They're not making site-specific decisions but it sets the stage for site-specific decisions. In that, you finish forest planning, it can take a long time, or sometimes it takes, you know, Custer Gallatin in my backyard up in Montana took about five years. It's also, in my opinion, the best of the forest plans to be done. They did a really good job of integrating recreation into other things. Also, just really good balance of like forward-thinking conservation and how you balance protecting large landscapes and big critters with a really robust outdoor recreation industry, or just livelihood and growing communities. And I think that that forest plan is a really good example, and I could nerd out on that with you for a long time, but David asked me about winter travel planning. So you have, in your forest plan, you have your vision for desired future recreation settings, but the forest plan, they sign it and nothing changes. And so until the Forest Service does site-specific planning, it's just this nice idea of like, okay, well, we all agreed that this is what it should be in the future, and maybe sometime in the next 40 years we'll get around to it. So one thing that we work on at Winter Wildlands is

really pushing the Forest Service to commit to doing the site-specific winter travel planning in particular to bring that winter recreation opportunity spectrum to life, and so Jamie mentioned the Grand Mesa Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests. They are just finishing their forest plan revision, and the next step will be winter travel planning, and there's a couple of folks from Crested Butte here who are gonna be at the forefront of that, and we wanna make sure that the forest plan sets a good vision, so it's really important to get involved in that and make sure that the big picture vision aligns with what we'd like, especially as non-motorized backcountry ski, snowshoe, ice climbing folks, we really focus in on the primitive and the semi-primitive settings, because those are the places, those are the roadless lands, the wilderness areas, the places that are maybe recommended for future wilderness protections, and so we focus on those a lot, because if it's semi-primitive, non-motorized, or primitive in the forest plan, it's kind of off the table for winter travel planning. The forest plan is then saying, we're not going to designate those places for snowmobile use. The rest of the forest, you know, the semi-primitive, motorized, roaded, natural, and rural, that's what you're talking about when you get into travel management planning, but it doesn't mean that those places are now all going to be designated for motorized snowmobile use. That's where the site-specific conversations happen, so groomed Nordic ski trail systems are almost certainly happening in rural and roaded, natural, and to some extent, but not as much semi-primitive, motorized settings. Those are places that, first of all, to groom, you have to have a motor vehicle, but also, they're a front country, right? There's also places that, you know, on the big picture scale are suitable for snowmobiling and motorized recreation, but when you fine-tune it and get into it, maybe it's, you know, this drainage, or this bowl, or this side of the road should be non-motorized so that we have a balance of recreation, or, you know, this larger area's suitable for motorized use, but we have a population of endemic plants that we want to protect and we want to make sure that they're not getting crushed, and so we're not gonna have that designated for snowmobile use. So, yeah, I think, you know, the forest plan, you have your big picture, you're really looking at integration, so again, that ROS should be like that river flowing through everything, and then when you get to travel management planning, it's not as programmatic. You're not thinking about how snowmobile designations impact the forest grazing program, or, you know, the mineral leasing program, or how those things impact that. You've already covered that in forest planning, and you're really getting into nuts and bolts of, you know, site-specific, should we have this trail open to snowmobiles, or is it a Nordic ski trail? Should this drainage be motorized access, or is it human-powered access? Is this, you know, big-game winter range, you know, should it be open to anybody? You know, like, those sorts of conversations are what happen in travel planning.

David Page: Nice, so I want to kick it back to you, Sam, and kind of a forked, complex question, which seems appropriate to Washington office of the Forest Service. So, you know, you talked about 2012 planning rule, and then there's the 2015 over-snow vehicle rule, both sort of guidance from above, from the Washington office, and you're hearing some perspectives from the ground as to how those planning rules are implemented. And then we back up to the 30,000-foot level, and you've been involved in a whole sort of strategic planning effort for the Forest Service called Reimagine Recreation. I was tuned in to a bunch of Zoom meetings a few

weeks back. It was really great discussion, but super high-level. Like, what is the agency doing on all these fronts? What are we doing well? What are we not doing well? What do we need to change? So the fork is, you know, go the strategic planning route if you want, but also how do we get that, all of that really good discussion at the strategic planning level, Washington office level, back down to the district ranger level, or the forest unit level, where it impacts the people who are out recreating.

Sam Rider:

Yeah. Well, first of all, I just want to carry you around in my pocket, Hillary, because you do a great job explaining ROS and everything. And I guess the only thing I'd add is that the way I think about ROS at that programmatic scale is like, ROS is like the vibe that we're going for on these landscapes, right? And then it does kind of set the path for those site-specific, use-specific travel management decisions that then are going to show up in a motor vehicle use map or in the winter, over snow vehicle use map. And those are the things that are actually enforceable. So that's kind of the difference there, just to add on to the great illustration that you gave. And I like the tributary image. Okay, so back to the Framework for Sustainable Recreation that came out in 2010, has all those great principles, has, I think, the main vision is about recreation across public lands, renewing body and spirit, has all this great stuff, right? But then there was never really a so what. Well, how are we going to achieve this vision, right? So as the rest of the world noticed in 2020 and the couple of years after that, man, even more people than the spike in the 60s and beyond realized, man, going outside is awesome. And it has all these benefits for us personally in communities. And I don't have to go on about that. And there are impacts as well, right? So our deputy chief and our chief's office said, all right, REC program, do we have a plan for how we're gonna address all this stuff that's going on, all this interest and impacts that come along with it? And meanwhile, a lot of our infrastructure is still from the 60s and 70s and built in floodplains and that sort of thing. And the answer was no, we didn't have a plan. We had some good principles about sustainable recreation and that stuff, but the agency really hasn't had set priorities for recreation because as was mentioned before, the Forest Service was set up as timber and fire and recreation, although it's the way that most of the public experiences their forest system lands. It's kind of like that third big but little brother that's trying to get a seat at the table, right? So you ask a planner to come up with a plan, well, we're gonna create a process. So that's what we did. Kicked this thing off about a year ago and we started, it's not a NEPA process or anything, but engagement is super important. And as what's been talked about before, again, with integration, you can't really integrate and cross boundaries and create relationships without doing a bunch of engagement and talking, right? We thought we knew what the issues and opportunities were and we wanted to gut check that and validate it and have conversations. So we started with some really robust internal engagement, which I've been told the likes of which has not really been done with rec techs all the way on up throughout the agency, held a handful of webinars, put out a survey in case folks just couldn't attend those live sessions, held a tribal forum that we gathered a bunch of good perspectives in that way and we're trying to work with our regional and more local counterparts to dig in deeper with tribes. And then recently, what David just talked about is we held a three-day workshop with partner groups and we co-convened the thing with eight different groups, National Forest Foundation, Outdoor Alliance, Leave No Trace, Tread Lightly, American Trails, Next 100 Coalition, and I'm

gonna miss, a Greening Youth Foundation, I'm gonna miss a couple of others, and it was really great. So now we're at the point where we've gathered all this information, we've gut checked what we thought we knew, and we're starting to put pen to paper for a strategy, so strategic elements like a vision, key shifts to achieve an overall culture shift that gets that big little brother recreation at the table consistently, and goals. And then, really where the rubber hits the road is those actions, specific actions that we're gonna carry out to get us there. What do we mean by actions? Again, this is a national level effort. So we're talking about, hey, that's great that we have this forest plan revision, what do they call it, planning service organization now to build capacity around getting forest plans done quicker than 10 years, five years, but what about all the other planning, all the other rec planning? So developing an action around, we need a structure within the agency to build capacity for rec planning at all scales, site, landscape, sub-regional, whatever. And kind of the three key shifts that we're thinking about, really, is about an empowered workforce, and that's not just butts in the seats, but that's the training and resources to be able to do their job. Engagement and communication, and then the third one, again, is around planning so that we can not be so reactionary and be more proactive to consider things like climate change and be a lot more resilient moving forward. Million dollar question, what does that mean? What does that mean for the units and for the regions? Well, again, the world, according to Sam, is that this is a national level effort, right? We're setting very clear messaging, I hope, by the end of this, that these are national level priorities for the chief's office, for the agency, for the department, which there has been a good amount of stoke from the department as well, which is good. And forests and units, a lot of them have regional rec strategies or unit rec strategies or something similar. If they wanna redo them to make sure that they're completely aligned to this national level thing, great. If they think what they've got is good and they wanna roll with it, cool. Whatever they wanna do, but really, we're hoping that this national level thing is gonna, again, set those national level priorities that can transcend administration changes and really kinda clear the path for regions and units to keep on doing the awesome work that they're doing and then clear other paths to do work that they really wish that they had the support and the resources to do so.

David Page:

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David Page:

Thanks, Sam. So I'm gonna kick it over to you, Jamie. Kind of on that note or to follow through on that, I feel like one of the things we've talked about is how our organizations sometimes serve as a conduit or a messenger or a facilitator between the awesome work that Sam's office is doing at the national level and setting policy and the decision makers at the forest level where we sort of have to show up at these meetings and say, oh, by the way, there's the Sustainable Recreation Framework from 2010. Maybe you've heard of it. Here's a copy. And we do end up a lot of, we end up doing a lot of the education of, this is what the process has been elsewhere and here are the people who've been through it and trying to put forest supervisor with forest supervisor to talk about things where that communication doesn't necessarily happen because of the structure of the agency. So that's one thing if you wanna talk about that. And then you also mentioned this OA audit around forest planning. If you wanna speak to that, that'd be great.

Jamie Ervin:

Sure. So on the national policy question, I mean, that's part of how we see OA's role, right? Is like how do we, well, first knowing that these national policy initiatives exist and then being there for something like the Reimagine Recreation workshops that the Forest Service did a few months ago. And these, like a lot of time with forest planning or travel planning, these decisions get very locally political for the forest supervisors or for the district rangers, whoever's making the decision on behalf of the Forest Service. And like, I feel a little like OA's role is to be able to step back from that a little bit and tie to more like national goals around sustainability, sustainable recreation and like how this applies. What I've been doing lately more of is thinking about these newer policy initiatives at the Forest Service and how they might apply to forest planning. So like, for example, I don't know if you guys have followed this, but there's an executive order from two years ago around mature and old growth forests. The Forest Service just finished this inventory, national inventory of old growth and mature forests that they're now figuring out what to do in the policy space on. Or like, I think we may see a policy coming up to protect old growth forests at the national level. And I think that'll tie to forest planning. And for some of the forests that we've participated in plan revisions on, that's been a really weedy issue. Like where I live on the Nantahala Pisgah, that was like one of the most contentious issues that the forest plan addressed was where or when might we allow some logging in older forests? Because we know they're lacking across the landscape. So I think that ability to step back, I think is OA's role. And then while also having people in the trenches like Hillary and David to navigate the local politics and that kind of thing. On the forest planning audit, I actually just wrote down while I was talking to our director Adam or CEO Adam last week about this, like some lessons learned for this. And we already talked about one of them, which is integration. But I wanted to just mention a few. One from forest planning that I think's relevant to this group is like a lot of the time we know the valuable recreation areas on the national forest like as well or better than Forest Service planners. And that's not a dig on the Forest Service, but like for some of these sports that OA represents, it's like pretty niche, right? Like whitewater paddling, like unless you have a really dedicated paddler on the Forest Service staff, like they might not know that something is a regionally or nationally significant whitewater run on their forest. And so like we've done a fair amount of work identifying those specifically whitewater runs. Like we worked hard to get Dinky Creek on the Southern Sierra designated as an eligible wild and scenic river. So I don't know if anyone's a paddler, but that's like if you Google Southern Sierra

paddling, that's like one of the main things that will come up is kayakers flying down Dinky Creek and like the Forest Service missed that. And same where I live on the North Fork French Abroad. So like you being there is really valuable to point that things out, those kinds of things out. And I think the same likely goes for backcountry skiing. I think another thing about our approach to planning, like showing up, I think, especially initially with the 2012 planning rule, it's written very elegantly. There's a lot of stuff we like in there. And I think a lot of folks in our stakeholder group thought this was gonna be like forest plan nirvana. I think it's how Adam put it, right? Like we were gonna get these perfect forest plans. And like, honestly, like my take on it is more along the lines of like, we're a little bit there to mitigate like a more disastrous forest plan or like keep bad things from happening and like just make sure that our modes of recreation and areas we care about are recognized. And then just one more thing from the list here is like, for us now, we've engaged on a number of these plans and have done a lot of collaboration to inform each one. Like we have this whole visioning group for the GMUG forest that put out this collaborative vision for the GMUG. Like we've worked with this partnership on the Nehe Lopizga. And even though the forest plans are kind of drawing to a close on those, those plans that we've put together and the consensus we've built is now forming the basis for legislative proposals in some cases. And so it's like still valuable work, even though it wasn't an immediate success in the forest plan. And just to conclude all that, like, I mean, we're doing an audit, like a data driven, what worked, what didn't work. We don't have any results of it yet, but I think there's a little bit of, I'm still unclear after having really participated in one of these of like, what does effective advocacy on a forest plan look like? It doesn't seem like throwing a million letters at the Forest Service is especially influential. Like it does seem like some things like, showing that you've reached consensus on things is useful. So we're going through, we're doing a bunch of surveys and stakeholder interviews with our group to inform this. And I think hopefully we'll have some kind of public facing document on it. Because it's a huge time commitment, right? And like, if what's needed is that I just write three letters at each stage of the plan revision process, like maybe that's one thing. But like, we've really gone deep on these. Like I think on Nantahala Pisgah, it's been 12 years of going to collaborative meetings and really making some complicated decisions. So anyway, just sharing that we're kind of rethinking that as the Forest Service scales up, doing a ton more plans over the next five, six years.

David Page:

Thanks, Jamie. Complicated dance. So before we open it up to the audience for broader conversation, Hillary, I wanted to give you a chance to talk about implementation, which, you know, for example, on the Stanislaus National Forest, after seven years of over-snow vehicle planning and the whole history that led to that rule and everything, we finally got a final plan, signed record of decision and a map. It was now two seasons ago, and I think we've made some pretty interesting progress in terms of implementing that. Of course, the plan is in litigation and was immediately, but the forest supervisor is Jason Kiken, who was here on the last panel. And it's just been really interesting to see how a plan like this actually works on the ground for skiers, for snowmobilers, for winter recreation. So if you want to speak to that.

Hillary Eisen:

Yeah, and the Stanislaus Forest, so they did travel planning without an updated forest plan. And so that is a whole other rent. Their forest plan is probably older than me. I don't really know, actually. So they're eventually gonna have to redo that, which is then gonna affect their travel plan, most likely, in some way. But in the meantime, we spent eight years, seven or eight years, working on a travel plan, winter travel plan for the Stanislaus. They finished, as David said, okay, great, we have this. It means something. This is the site-specific thing. This is the meaningful thing. And it took them a little while. Forest Service doesn't necessarily publish their maps as soon as they publish their plans. But eventually, six months later, we had a map. But if anyone's familiar with the Forest Service over-snow vehicle maps or motor vehicle maps, they're not actually intended for navigation or for really understanding. They're an enforcement tool. But that's kind of what they had. So last winter, the Forest Service, they printed out their over-snow vehicle use maps. They put them up in a couple places. And we were like, this is not gonna quite be enough. And the Stanislaus does have a couple snow rangers who are out on the ground. But again, it's a big forest. And so we pioneered, well, pioneered is not the right word. We started a new program in California that is based off of work that our grassroots groups, many of whom are represented here, have been doing for a number of years. So here in Colorado, and we have another panel that'll talk a bunch about this. But Colorado Mountain Club has a snow rangers program where they work with the Euray Ranger District and have kind of a strong partnership where they've got CMC staff that are out on the ground working, kind of doing the job that the Forest Service sometimes does and doesn't always have the capacity to do, to educate users about winter recreation. While they're, when they're out there recreating. And also to collect data, Teton Backcountry Alliance also has a backcountry or Teton Pass Ambassador program geared at backcountry skiers, educating them about, please don't park like an idiot. Please pick up after your dog. Be aware of avalanche conditions. You know, just educating skiers so that we can have more people out recreating without having an ever-increasing impact. Because the more of us there are, the more impact there is, but we can mitigate that by educating ourselves and our communities to lessen each person's individual impact and therefore a collective impact. And that's more sustainable in the long run. Kind of getting back to the sustainable recreation topic here. So in California, as we're seeing winter travel planning slowly, you know, come to completion, we were like, we want to make sure that we are helping the Forest Service implement these plans. One, so that, you know, they perform as intended. And two, you know, as recreation numbers grow, we want to, you know, see as these other, as these other partners of ours have done, that through education, you can lessen impacts and therefore, you know, be more sustainable in the long run. And so we worked with actually a number of grassroots partners across California on data collection, which again, we'll talk about on another panel. But we also, on the Stanislaus specifically, had a seasonal employee, a contractor, who was out calling her a backcountry ambassador. And she was talking to people at the trailheads. Our hope is that this coming season, I just had a conversation with the Forest yesterday about putting together a partnership agreement so that, you know, our backcountry ambassador is helping the Forest Service putting up signs. You know, it snows a lot in the Sierras. So moving those signs up as the snow gets deeper so they don't just get buried. You know, keeping track of things. How many people are in this parking lot every day? Where is the trash accumulation? Where's, you know, what are just the maintenance issues that need to be addressed? What kind of uses are occurring in what places? Like, oh,

this trailhead is actually really popular with snow play. Like people just coming with their plastic sleds and snowman building material. It's not really, you know, it's a snow park, but it's not a snowmobile and backcountry ski zone. But all that snow play can actually pose a safety hazard to anyone who's trying to backcountry ski your snowmobile because you got little kids running around and people who maybe aren't aware of these other winter sports. And so how do you manage those, you know, conflicts, which we never even talked about in travel planning. And then, you know, putting up, like I said, the boundary signs. You know, if you have areas that are not open to snowmobiling, you have to mark those boundaries in a lot of cases for people to know. And then the Sierra Avalanche Center doesn't do a lot of reporting work down on the Stanislaus. So collecting observations to build out that avalanche education so that, you know, as you have more people recreating on that forest, they're getting that same avalanche information that folks in Tahoe or other kind of more focused avalanche center places are getting.

David Page:

Terrific. Okay, so there's a whole range of things.

Anybody got questions they wanna throw out? I did have in my notes, Jamie, that I was supposed to lead the question and answer with you asking a question to Sam, but I don't remember what it was. If you have one. Anybody got a question for these guys?

Yeah, go ahead. Carmela.

Carmela Montenegro:

Hi, thank you. So I heard a lot about educating a lot of people on backcountry safety. One issue that I find, one challenge that I find when I talk to people who are talking about strategy and educating everybody is that they neglect to talk about the Spanish-speaking communities. So I'm curious if you have any specific strategies, implementations, budgets to communicate with these communities. I've seen people translate trailheads. I've seen people do more bilingual Spanish-speaking education classes, but there's exponential growth, especially in resort towns of Spanish-speaking communities where there's single-digit percentages of growth when it comes to educating these communities. I'd like to hear more on specific strategies that are more than just average.

David Page:

Yeah, I'll give it to you, Hilary. And I'll just say, Carmela, I really appreciate you bringing that up because it's a huge issue. It's definitely a huge issue where I live, where the population in Mammoth Lakes is probably 60% Hispanic and all the signs are in English. And I would just say from our perspective, we're just starting the sign design. So now's the time to start talking about how to integrate those sorts of things. And a lot of the west side forests that we're working on have communities that are coming up who could use some multilingual signage.

Hilary Eisen:

Yeah, and kind of along those same lines, a project that Winter Wildlands has going on in Bozeman that I'm working on, which is an implementation project. The Bridger Mountains, which are just north of town, super accessible, lots of different types of recreation happening. We're working with a big stakeholder group on getting consistent signs on all the trailhead kiosks that are kind of etiquette, education, maps, whatever. And we feel like a really important piece of that is making sure that those signs are available in Spanish language as well. And the Forest Service is really excited about this because they don't have any bilingual signage, probably on any sign in Montana. Except for the flag. The flag's not placed. Or are we glad that it's not? Oh yeah, it's true, our state flag. That's not on any Forest Service signs. But it's interesting because they feel like they don't have the kiosk space to have two signs. And I'm like, Canada does this everywhere. Everything in Canada is in French and English. Like maybe we should go look and see what they're doing. But so what we're doing, and this is, I'd love feedback on this, and it's a very trial thing, but every sign that we're putting up there, there's a QR code, and in Spanish it says, to read this in Spanish, please scan here, and then we'll have the exact same information, the exact same sign, but all the text is in Spanish. That'll be, you pull it up on your phone on the QR code. And there isn't cell service across every single trailhead in this range, but most of them. And we feel like it's a starting point. But I'd love to hear from Sam and Jamie on maybe what some more strategic projects are that are going on.

Sam Rider:

Yeah, sure, so coming up to the 30,000 foot, 20,000 foot, wherever we're at here, definitely have that in mind in terms of this Reimagine Recreation strategy. And I'll also say, I was remiss in saying earlier that there's a lot of plans and initiatives and everything in this agency. We've got the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, which has been talked about. We've got 10-Year Trail Challenge, Equity Action Plan. I forget what the tribal plan is called, but we've got that. A strategic plan for the department came out not too long ago, so on and so forth. And so part of what we wanna do with our strategy is we've got some smarty pants combing through all of those existing plans, existing initiatives, or ones that are underway to see where's recreation called out explicitly, implicitly. And by recreation, I mean like all spheres of the human dimension, social aspect, and where can our plan kind of fill in the gaps. I'm pretty positive, I don't have the specifics, don't have the plan in front of me, that the Equity Action Plan does call out this issue that you're bringing up. And that's kind of like one of those things that we would really try to walk the walk of talk in the talk of integrating. First, the Forest Service needs to do a good job of integrating across our program areas and directorates before we can really show up as better partners in the whole we collective recreation workforce that again keeps on being talked about, that one agency, one partner, whoever can't do this stuff alone, it's gonna take the collective over time.

Jamie Ervin:

Yeah. Agree, it is important, woefully ignorant on solutions.

David Page:

Yeah, thanks for bringing that up, keep bringing it up. Gotta keep bringing that one up. In the back.

Audience member:

Okay, so I'm curious to know historically what user group is the most involved in forest planning, like who's showing up the most, and then how can we make sure that over time that every user group has skin in the game?

Sam Rider:

Good question. I mean, I think it probably varies by forest and place. I mean, it kind of traditionally breaks down by motorized, non-motorized, and then it kind of runs the gamut everywhere in between. I don't really know if there's necessarily one user group who kind of always shows up, but I mean, you got, when certain user groups have great advocacy groups, like human powered winter sports, those folks are organized to show up. So not a great answer, but it just kind of depends.

Hilary Eisen:

I just add, Jamie alluded at one point to it. It's not that helpful, or maybe it's not helpful to have our members send in a million comments. And I think the traditional advocacy engagement strategy was the big conservation groups, and we're, OA and Winter Wildlands are equipped to do this as well. Like you send out the alert, click here to comment, and a million people send in the form letter. We've never even come close to a million. We don't have that many contacts. But Sierra Club, they can pump out those letters. And again, is that useful? I don't know. But then the Forest Service, there's also the public meeting component, and who shows up to that. Like Sam said, it depends on the place. Sometimes you've got a local environmental group that's real engaged, and they get their members. Often the motorized recreation community is really good at showing up. They're very organized. So that's been my experience, at least.

Sam Rider:

Yeah, I guess I'll just tag onto that, that at those public meetings, I was involved in the early portions of the GMUG Gray Mesa and Compadre Gunnison Forest Plan. And I will say that I tend to get cornered mostly by very large snowmobilers and very large ATVers. So are they, does that mean that they're most interested or most showing up in the ways that is helpful? I don't know. But I definitely have been cornered a lot more by those groups.

David Page:

Thanks, great question. Keith, and then over to Marla.

Keith:

Hey, thanks, everyone. I think there's questions for Hillary. How much would you say enforcement or lack of ability to enforce plays into a winter travel planning decision?

Hilary Eisen:

I mean, I think it's a really important piece of implementation. And one case that we try to make from the very beginning of winter travel planning is that you need to have an enforceable plan and a plan that's gonna make sense to people. Whether I'm out on foot or on a snowmobile, if

there's just an arbitrary boundary, I may not even know it's there, right? And I remember, it was actually the first grassroots conference that I attended, or well, organized, my first conference at Winter Wildlands back in 2015. In Golden, Colorado, the, at the time, Vail Pass Snow Ranger, Anne's predecessor, was there and he was talking about enforcement of winter travel planning. And that he used his hand as an example and said, if you're gonna close five drainages, you close it at the wrist. You don't close each finger, because then you have to go to each of those fingers and patrol those places. And that's not gonna be possible. So I think planning for an enforceable plan is key. But you can't rely on enforcement alone, because even with a super robust partnership with the Forest Service and however many nonprofits in the local community, these are really big landscapes. People are doing things and going places all different times of the day and different days of the week. And so you have to have buy-in to your plan as well. It has to make sense, so that it's easy for people to follow the rule without even knowing that they're doing it. You have to have community buy-in to the extent possible so people feel like, I want to follow this, because I understand where it's coming from and it makes sense to me. And I see that I'm part of a social world here and I have to play nice. And then you do have to have that hammer of like, you could get caught, you could get a ticket. You can't, the Forest Service does need to actually enforce the plans. Hopefully I answered your question.

David Page:
Marla.

Marla Bailey:
That was pretty much my same question. So maybe to follow on for the strategic, the recreation plan, Sam, that you're working on, how much attention is being given to the concept of the enforcement? So once the boundary's there, I mean, since COVID where I live, it's 300%. There's always snowmobile tracks within the wilderness boundary. And it's almost like, how can we as residents, citizens help the Forest Service with that regard?

Sam Rider:
Yeah, totally. You know, through all of these engagements, we've had a lot of root cause discussions of like, okay, here's an issue, but why, why, why? And a lot of times it comes back to enforcement, which again, you go deeper on that and its capacity, right? So a large aspect of this strategy and these actions really hope, you know, one of those key shifts will be empowering a workforce, building capacity, rec techs, law enforcement officers, you know, the ability to better partner and have, you know, better communication with communities so that we can do that collective enforcement. So I guess to me, it all really comes back to capacity. And I hope that if this plan can achieve, well, two things, I guess, would be to create a long lasting structure for all scales of rec planning in the agency, as well as address capacity across the social and rec sphere within the agency, not only again, butts in seats for agency personnel, but just being able to make it easier to reach our grants and agreement staff to, you know, make those contracts to do the work. You know, there's just, there's so many aspects to it to peel back that we really kind of need an overall workforce investment plan that hits all the things because it's all interconnected. So that was a long answer. Hopefully it kind of gets to what you were asking.

David Page:

Okay, we got one more in the back, Hal, and then we'll give everybody a little break for the next one.

Hal:

This is Hal Hallstein here. I was really interested in your comments about when these maps are published. Often they're put up at one or two locations, and sometimes, to my experience, there are multiple clicks to find and locate. What's the status of the conversation of distributing maps, current technology, and what the Forest Service is kind of looking at there?

Hilary Eisen:

Yeah, so the Forest Service is really good about putting their maps on Avenza. However, how many people in this room use Avenza? Okay, got like three, one of whom's a Forest Service employee, so it doesn't count. So, I don't know, I think maybe the hands would be a little bit higher if this was a room full of motorized users, but it's not the top app that we're all using, but the agency's not always up to date. But also, OnX and other mapping apps, they pull Forest Service data, they put that onto their apps as well, although depending on the focus of the app, it can change. And then, where I've seen a lot of success, too, is maybe I'm just old-fashioned, but I really like paper maps, and seeing partnerships between local organizations and the agency to take that over-snow vehicle use map data, the GIS data, and put it onto a more user-friendly map that also has education stuff, like leave no trace, here's what you do to store your food for bears, this is what you need to know about snow depth, that sort of stuff. Those sorts of partnerships can be really helpful as well. And pass it to Sam.

Sam Rider:

Yeah, I'll just tag onto that and say that this was a specific topic, all things data, that was part of that external engagement workshop that we held back in July, and actually, Adam Kramer opened up that session talking about how important it is. Data for data is only so much, right? We need a consistent collective narrative to go with it. And to me, that's kind of what it makes me think of when you were saying, well, that's great that we've got these OSVMs, but that ain't gonna cut it. We need education, we need probably maps that are easier to read. All of these things that go into the REC ecosystem of a narrative. So I guess all of that is to say that the data, in terms of the nitty gritty, and also the data conversation in terms of what do we do with the data, what does it mean, the whole narrative around it, definitely a part of the conversation.

David Page:

Thanks for a great discussion, you guys. Thank you so much.

Emily Scott:

Today's episode was hosted by Winter Wildlands Alliance's Executive Director, David Page, produced and edited by Tess Goodwin, and directed by me, Emily Scott. Our music is by Rattlesnake Preachers, featuring our very own National Snow School Director, Carrie McClay.

Find them on Instagram at rattlesnakepreachers. Thanks to our panelists, Hilary Eisen, Jamie Irvin, and Sam Ryder. Thank you again to our conference sponsors, Outdoor Alliance, Mighty Arrow Foundation, REI, and our episode sponsor and backcountry partner, John and Wendy at Alpine Quest Sports. And thank you for listening to Trail Break Radio. To find more Winter Wildlands Alliance content, check out our website at winterwildlands.org. Join us and support our work to inspire and empower people to protect America's wild snowscapes. Next up, a conversation with Wasatch Backcountry Alliance, Teton Backcountry Alliance, and Tahoe Backcountry Alliance about the latest efforts and ideas to solve traffic, parking, and crowd problems in some of our country's busiest backcountry access zones."