
Experiences from the Field: Embedded Volunteer Managers SUMMARY AND LESSONS

Overview:

The Forest Service relies on volunteer efforts to accomplish much of its critical work. Attracting and managing volunteers, however, is a complex and time-consuming task. Forest Service staff, already balancing multiple duties, can rarely dedicate the necessary time to building the relationships and managing the details of a robust volunteer program. One strategy for addressing this need is to employ an embedded volunteer manager. Rather than creating a completely new Forest Service position, some Forests have partnered with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to create volunteer manager positions that work closely with the Forest Service. Two forests in Colorado – the Rio Grande National Forest and the Pike and San Isabel National Forests – have implemented this strategy. The National Forest Foundation (NFF) held [a peer learning session on May 6, 2016](#) in which staff on these two forests shared the benefits, barriers, and lessons learned in partnering to create a volunteer manager position. Throughout the conversation, participants across the country shared helpful strategies and resources from their own volunteer programs. Best practices, lessons and resources are outlined below.

BENEFITS OF AN EMBEDDED VOLUNTEER MANAGER

A Forest Service-NGO partnership to support a volunteer manager offers multiple advantages.

- *Wider reach* – By partnering with an NGO, the Forest Service can benefit from that organization's recognition and outreach abilities.
- *Increase resources for events* – The partnering organization can find corporate sponsors and partnering organizations to support volunteer projects. The Forest Service cannot solicit sponsors, so an embedded manager supported by non-federal funds can fill an important capacity gap.
- *Often less expensive* – Depending on the partnership, it's often less expensive to hire a volunteer manager employed through a partnering organization than it is to hire a new federal employee. These positions can be funded in part by the Forest Service with support coming from the partner organization as well. It is possible for multiple organizations and agencies to partner together to fund the volunteer manager position.
- *Positive community attitudes* – Communities often become more positively engaged in Forest Service processes as a direct result of the time and attention a volunteer manager can give to volunteers.
- *Communicating relevance* – Besides making volunteering a smoother process, the volunteer manager can communicate closely with individual groups and show how Forest Service work is relevant to each group's interests.
- *A more responsive agency* – A volunteer manager is able to address the concerns of volunteer groups promptly and directly.

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FOREST SERVICE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Forest Service leadership and clarification of roles are critical components of a successful embedded volunteer manager partnership.

- *Forest Service leadership support* – The support of the forest’s leadership is vitally important. Specifically, the leadership must be committed to *funding* these programs. Encouraging volunteer management without funding is not likely to be sustainable.
- *District support* - Involving district rangers and staff is key to ensuring that (1) The FS identifies appropriate projects for volunteers and (2) volunteers and the FS build working relationships.
- *Forest Liaison* – A lead liaison on the forest is key in order to maintain the partner relationship, provide supervision to the volunteer manager, secure funding, solve problems, and champion the volunteer cause within the agency and to the public.

BEST PRACTICES FOR AN EMBEDDED VOLUNTEER MANAGER

Create a centralized volunteer website.

- The Salida/Leadville Ranger District has created a one-stop website for volunteering: <http://slrdvolunteers.blogspot.com/>. This resource gives volunteers a place to quickly view a calendar of events, obtain essential forms and information on volunteering processes, find current volunteering opportunities that others can join, and learn about future projects that could use volunteer assistance.

Prove the value of the program to agency staff and leadership.

- The NGO should strive to thoroughly understand the Forest Service’s needs in detail. District personnel often have long lists of projects that need completion. The FS and the NGO should stay in communication about project needs and help to identify projects that are within the means of the NGO’s volunteer abilities. The more the NGO is able to plan, staff, and complete a project on their own, the more the Forest Leadership will see their value.

Balance volunteer interests and agency goals.

- Volunteer partners often want to work on projects that match their specific interests. A sustainable recreation strategy, however, must ensure that resources are used to maintain recreation opportunities for long-term use. Volunteer resources are often best utilized in maintaining existing trails and recreational resources, rather than developing new projects that stretch beyond the Forest Service’s capacity to maintain. Discuss ways existing trails can be improved and augmented in ways that appeal to user interests. Instead of a completely new project, a smaller change might increase user interest in an existing trail or recreation opportunity.

- The Rio Grande National Forest convenes a regular roundtable meeting with trail users to identify recreational priorities and improvements to the trail system. In order to develop a trail system that is within their capacity to maintain, they discuss ways to improve existing trails and identify low priority trails to decommission.

Establish a liaison.

- Communicating well can be a big job. In addition to hiring a volunteer coordinator, it is good to ensure that a Forest Service representative can maintain communication between the agency and the partnering NGO.
- Having a good understanding of timelines and protocols for both the agency and the NGO is very important. This includes funding structures, communication processes, and staff roles and responsibilities.

Develop outreach and communication tools.

- Ask volunteers how they hear about opportunities. This will help identify what methods are most effective. No matter what medium is used, be sure to communicate often with volunteers. Send weekly reminders and updates about upcoming events. Ask volunteers to confirm their schedules in order to keep them involved.

Develop a strategy for volunteer recruitment and focus on groups of volunteers.

- Groups, such as civic organizations, recreation groups, religious groups, etc., are often much easier to attract to volunteering, rather than individuals. It usually pays off to focus advertising to groups.
- Individual volunteers are often very hard to come by, especially for projects that require a team. It is normal for individual volunteers to be hesitant about coming to a project alone. When a single volunteer is needed (e.g., for campsite hosts, etc.) it is helpful to consult Volunteers.gov or Volunteer Match (links below).

RESOURCES & LINKS

- Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC): www.voc.org.
- VOC smartphone application YourCO: www.voc.org/yourco-app-download
- Salida Ranger District volunteer website: <http://slrdvolunteers.blogspot.com/>
- Volunteers.gov: www.volunteer.gov
- Volunteer Match: www.volunteermatch.org