

Date submitted (Eastern Standard Time): 11/30/2020 6:05:52 PM

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Organization:

Title:

Comments:

RE: TRL-080814-FY-22-02 Southern Region Volunteer Center (Trails & Wilderness)

Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards (SAWS) is a conservation non-profit dedicated to providing stewardship to protected public lands in the Southern Appalachian region, including in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia, Arkansas and Kentucky. Founded in 2010, SAWS partners with federal land management agencies, including the Forest Service, to supplement existing stewardship efforts and provide additional support for training, skill-building and community engagement. SAWS works to support safe, equitable access to public lands, preserve natural resources, and develop the next generation of conservation stewards.

SAWS partners with the US Forest Service to deploy boots-on-the-ground shared stewardship efforts to help provide:

- * excellent customer service including maintaining and constructing sustainable trails, providing visitor education, and picking up litter and trash at campsites and trails in wilderness;
- * wilderness expertise in the form of Wilderness Character Monitoring leadership, data collection and assistance in drafting management documents;
- * critical skills trainings for volunteers, partner employees and Forest Service employees that work in wilderness; and
- * community engagement and support to support rural recreation economies and help communities realize the public assets in their backyards.

We work in 75 wilderness areas in partnership with ten National Forest in two regions of the US Forest Service (8 & 9) through regional and forest-level cooperative agreements. Annually, we contribute 15,000-25,000 volunteer and service hours to wilderness stewardship.

SAWS believes that restoration to the Southern Region Volunteer Center will not only promote long-term community engagement in shared stewardship of our exceptional Southern Region forests, but also will promote outdoor recreation and the economic vitality of rural communities in Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee; and will support and build capacity for public lands stewardship through hosting trainings and traveling field crews. We fully support the planned improvements to the USDA Forest Service Southern Region Volunteer Center. These improvements will allow SAWS to sustain and build capacity for wilderness trails maintenance, reducing the backlog of deferred maintenance across the regional wilderness, wilderness study, and inventoried roadless areas.

SAWS annually trains and certifies between 60-80 individuals in crosscut saw and ax use across the region, adding capacity for wilderness stewardship. We also train and deploy 3-4 paid field crews annually and we have a partnership with the US Naval Academy that engages up to 15 midshipmen annually in wilderness trail maintenance. The crews complete critical backcountry deferred maintenance projects in the National Forests in NC, Francis Marion-Sumter, Chattahoochee-Oconee, Cherokee, George Washington & Jefferson, Daniel Boone and the Monongahela National Forests. These crews would be able to train and deploy from the restored Southern Region Volunteer Center, ensuring that we could continue to provide excellent service for communities and visitors. We would also be able to host crosscut saw trainings at the Volunteer Center, enabling more capacity for wilderness stewardship across the region.

Investments in the Center now will ensure that its indispensable role in sustainable recreation across the Southern Region can continue for decades to come. As the intent of the Great American Outdoors Act is to reduce or eliminate deferred maintenance on our public lands, promote the management of America's forests, contribute to rural community economic development, leverage external resources (e.g. partners), and ensure health and safety, we at SAWS believe that releasing funds to restore and repair the Southern Region Volunteer Center via the Act will be funds prudently spent.

