



Final Notes

NAFSR Board Meeting - Denver

February 10-11, 2026

Day 1 – Tuesday, February 10

Attendees

Board Members - Steve Ellis (Chair), Becki Heath (Vice Chair), Johnny Hodges (Secretary), Cheryl Probert (R-1), Frank Beum (R-2), Jerry Perez (R-3), Paul Ries (R-4), Teresa Benson (R-5), Debbie Hollen (R-6), Marisue Hilliard (R-8), Don Howlett (R-9), Doug Crandall (Congressional Liaison), Rich Guldin (Research), Ralph Crawford (Research), Gene Blakenbaker (National), Nora Rasure (National), Jeanne Wade Evans (National), Tim DeCoster (National), Bill Avey (National), Susan Skalski (National), Mike Dudley, (National), Chuck Mark, (National), Ed Shepard (PLF Liaison)

Staff – Bill Disbrow (Webmaster)

Unable to Attend – Earl Stewart (R-10)

Please Note – There were numerous handouts sent to the Board members as pre-work. The handouts are not included in these meeting notes. If any NAFSR members would like a copy of any specific handout, please send us an email with the handout number(s) of your request.

Chair's Report – Steve Ellis

- Handout #2 – 2025 Accomplishment Report.
- This past year, new issues seemed to emerge on almost a weekly basis.

- We once again managed numerous Congressional and media inquiries.
- I routinely write out talking points when contacted by the media and if time allowed, run them by Doug and some of you depending on the topic.
- We have become a "go-to" organization for congressional staff and the media. It is important that we continue to maintain our reputation/standing with them as seasoned and experienced natural resource professionals.
- The big "unexpected" last year was the necessity to create an employee care team (Earl, Mary Beth & friends). This has not historically been a part of the NAFSR mission, but this team stepped up and provided a tremendous amount of information and assistance to FS employees.
- Kevin Martin is an essential player for our organization right now. He is very effective in working with the 52-organization coalition, AWCP (American Wildlife Conservation Partners).
- Last Spring the retired FS Chiefs decided to hold occasional Zoom meetings. They invited me (as NAFSR Chair) to join some of the meetings. It was important to them that their external messaging be coordinated with, and not inconsistent with NAFSR's messaging. We have been letting them review our draft position letters.
- We have put most of our advocacy focus on influencing Congress.
- NAFSR should try to avoid being viewed as against everything the administration is proposing. Offering alternatives is probably a good thing, and we have done some of this in our letters. We have also gone on record as supporting the *Fix our Forests Act*, as well as increased logging (we have not indicated any amount), streamlining NEPA, and some changes to the fire organization.
- We clearly support keeping "Americas Lands" in public hands.
- There is no lack of natural resources issues to engage in. Probably more issues than we have bandwidth to engage. A primary focus for NAFSR right now is to save the FS.
- The current administration has successfully used the narrative that everything is ok and morale is good...that the budget and staffing reductions are to remove waste, fraud, and abuse. We have mostly been hearing the opposite from employees, and that morale is not good.
- Thank you all for your help and support over the last five years. Bill Avey will do a great job as our new Chair!

2026-27 Program of Work – Becki Heath

We need a small group to develop the Program of Work (priorities) for 2026-27. – Jerry Perez, Teresa Benson and Chuck Mark agreed to help Becki. They will have a new POW prepared before the next Board meeting and ask for approval.

Business Report – Johnny Hodges and Bill Disbrow

- Johnny reviewed Handout #3 – 2025 Final Financial Summary. We finished the year within our budget.
- The Board formally approved the 2025 Financial Summary.
- Bill D. summarized some general statistics (Handout #11) from our website activity.
- A few numbers –
 - “Total hits” increased from 514,793 in 2024 to 1,372,520 in 2025.
 - “Page views” increased from 88,974 in 2024 to 191,618 in 2025.
 - “Visitors” increased from 47,245 in 2024 to 166,193 in 2025.

Introduction to Decision Items and Process – Tim DeCoster

Tim reviewed the Decision Items on the agenda. Most of the topics will be presented for discussion today and decisions tomorrow.

Communications Strategy – Communications Committee

- Handout #4,5,6,7,8
- Marisue Hilliard reviewed the Communications Strategy in Handout #4.
- The Board was then divided into small groups that discussed various questions posted by the Communications Committee around the room.

Employee Care Team – Bill Avey (for Earl Stewart)

- Bill reviewed Handout #9.
- The FS has lost 10,000 employees resulting in the loss of many of the most experienced and knowledgeable employees in the workforce.
- As a result, remaining FS employees have few internal resources to consult for informal coaching, mentorship, and sharing of lessons learned from past work efforts that can inform and support current program of work requirements.
- The team is recommending that we pursue a formal relationship with the FS through a MOU or some other instrument that identifies shared interests and mutual benefits for both NAFSR and FS leadership.

Legislative Report – Doug Crandall

- There are 265 days until mid-term elections.
- This is potentially the least productive Congress in modern times.
- Discharge petition – with 218 votes you can go around the speaker – it has happened 8 times this year.
- A dozen Republicans (House) voted to overturn Presidential vetoes.

- The good news is the Interior Appropriations Bill passed with large margins. It was contrary to the President's budget. We ended up doing well overall.
- Language was included that requires an independent study before making any big moves.
- Farm Bill – The Chair wants it done next month. ACES is safe until the end of year.
- The Transportation Bill is important to the FS.
- Two other important Bills - Great American Outdoors Act and Fix Our Forests Act.
- A possible emerging issue – fire funding fix expires at end of 2027. Back to fire borrowing?? We would lose ½ the FS budget.
- Mid-terms – Retirements are 2-1 Republicans. They expect to lose the House.
- Trump is a lame duck, but MAGA support is still over 90%.
- Schedule F is still hanging around.
- NAFSR is highly respected. We need to maintain all of our contacts.

Emerging Issues – Becki Heath

- Personnel policies
- Fire funding fix
- Transportation Bill
- Fire Organization Consolidation
- Congressional Review Act
- No public lands
- Developing a Position on Personnel Management
- Focus on saving the agency
- USDA Reorganization

USFS Conversation – Troy Heithecker, Regional Forester, Rocky Mountain and Northern Regions (Becki and Frank facilitate)

- On behalf of the Chief, Regional Forester Troy Heithecker spent a generous amount of time with the Board sharing general insights into current happenings within the agency and leading an open Q&A's/discussion.
- Chris French is running day to day operations of the FS while the Chief travels extensively

Partnership Development and Management – Becki Heath

- Two of our active partnerships are with the Public Lands Foundation (PLF) and the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP).
- Retain our nonpartisan stance.
- Retain our reputation as natural resource managers with the agency.

- Partnerships should be (roughly) mutually beneficial.
- There are degrees of partnerships/associations.
- Identify target audiences.
- Develop a list of organizations that we might build a relationship with.
- Do we have the capacity to take on more partnerships?
- Threat to Public Lands – how do we find the groups that are interested in that issue?

Conversation with ANPR Guests (Association of National Park Rangers) – Becki Heath, moderator

- Mike Pflaum, President and Bill Wade, Executive Director.
- Mission – to support employees and the mission of the NPS.
- Staffing levels – down 24%.
- NPS budget – 0.6% of federal budget.
- Morale of current employees is big issue.
- Changes in employee ratings.
- Stovepipe law enforcement for DOI.
- 800 members, 11 board members.
- Membership is open to anyone.

Updates from Regional Reps, Committee Chairs, PLF

R 1+2 – Cheryl Probert

- Acting DRF in R-1, one director, 2 AD's.
- R-1 will provide the 2026 national Christmas tree.

R-3+4 – Jerry Perez, Paul Ries

- Information sharing is limited due to changes within the organization.
- What has been shared is already in the public domain.
- Due to demand, it is hard to connect with RF/DRF's.

R 8+9 – Marisue Hilliard and Don Howlett

- Ken Arney has been RF in R-8 since 2018.
- Deputy RF in R-9.
- R-9 has lost 40% of their employees.

R 5+6+10 – Teresa Benson

- Jacque Buchanan has 3 regions plus planning and tribal.
- Directors are providing support.
- Cal Fire wants to burn FS lands, but they don't want a FS burn boss.
- Sierra Pacific wants FS to ramp up timber target.
- N. Cal. Fire wants to retain current Fire organization.
- S. Cal. Fire wants to go to new organization.
- De-regulation push in agency.

WO Retirees – Tim DeCoster

- No leader yet after Bill Timko.
- Next meeting in March.
- Chris French agreed to stay on in WO for another year.
- USDA plans to sell the South Building and move people into Yates Building.

Recreation Committee – Nora Rasure

- Coalition of groups working on Great American Outdoor Recreation Act and Legacy Restoration Fund.
- Need a new leader for recreation committee.

Restoration Committee – Bill Avey

- Need a new leader for the committee.
- FOFA (Fix Our Forests Act) – participating in biweekly calls. FOFA may be attached to the Farm Bill.

Forest Climate Working Group – Rich Guldin

- FIA has lost 40% of its employees, primarily in data processing, analysis, and reporting. These were some of the highly experienced, most knowledgeable people in the units.
- Relying on partner organizations.
- Questions on operations on experimental forests and RNAs (Research Natural Areas).
- Loss of researchers and staff.

Fire Committee – Mike Dudley

- How would you reorganize the fire organization? Produced a 3-page report. Make changes to existing system.
- Review membership on fire committee – need some new blood.
- Grassroots FF has new chair and vice chair.

Public Lands Foundation – Ed Shepard

- Thank you for partnership.
- No director at BLM.
- Musical chairs of state directors may start soon.
- Used employee care documents from NAFSR.
- Lost 1900 employees, 24% of workforce.
- Final budget reduction of 2.7%.
- We will continue to award two \$5,000 scholarships per year.
- Student Congress will continue.
- New Fire Org. – If 80% of duties are fire, then moved to new fire organization.
- Continuing battle over Public Lands.
- Congressional Review Act could affect 80% of BLM lands.

BIN Items – Ralph Crawford

- Social media.
- Becki - ACES is extended to 9/30. 100 people working (down from 500).
- Experimental forests.
- Cheryl – Next Student Congress is 2027. Planning to be led by NAFSR. Working on a theme.

Day 2 – Wednesday, February 11

Communications/Social Media – Debbie Hollen

- Motion to change the constitution/bylaws to add current and former employees as voting members of NAFSR. Motion approved.
- Continue with small groups discussing posted questions.

Employee Care – Bill Avey

- Motion to provide mentors/advisors through a MOU or MOA with FS. Motion passed.

Recognitions and Awards – Tim DeCoster

- Handout #10.
- McGuire and Leisz awards are our only existing awards
- Three new awards are being proposed:
 - Joyce Davis Award- Recognizes an individual who consistently provides extra effort or exceptional support to the agency or service to the public, well above and beyond their normal duties.

- Mentorship Award- Recognizes an individual or group who displays critical skill sets and advances management interests by mentoring, coaching, leading or developing others to advance public lands management.
- Seven Generations Award- Recognizes an individual or group who did the right thing by the land by stepping up in the face of intense political pressures to honor the seven generations concept.
- Motion - The Board of Directors approves an amendment to the Bylaws to incorporate the addition of three new awards, to provide for Board approval of awards, and other conforming amendments. Motion was approved.

Installation Ceremony

Tim DeCoster managed the Installation Ceremony as we changed Chairs with Steve Ellis stepping down and Bill Avey taking over as Chair. We posted a video of the ceremony on our website. Steve received a gift for his years of service. Bill was given a new gavel. We all drank a toast to Steve. Both Steve and Bill made a few remarks.

Membership Committee Report – Nora Rasure

Nora discussed this year’s membership drive which ended on February 2. We gained 73 new members during the month-long drive. This year’s drive generally followed the format of our 2025 drive.

We held the drawing for the Grand Prize of a free Lifetime Membership. Current members were given one entry in the drawing for each new member they recruited. Ann Bartuska was the winner of the drawing.

2028 FS Retiree Reunion – Tim DeCoster and Bill Disbrow

- Tim led a discussion of how NAFSR could become more visible at the next reunion.
- Bill Disbrow is the co-chair of the 2028 reunion to be held in Madison, Wisconsin.

Fire Organization – Becki Heath and Mike Dudley

- The Fire consolidation study which is included in the Appropriations Bill for the FS is there because of NAFSR. Signs are positive that the study will happen. 120 days to complete.
- DOI is in the process of consolidation – combining 4 bureaus into 1. They have nothing in common. Very complicated.

Linkage of Research, Science and Forest Management – Ralph Crawford and Rich Guldin

- Rich gave a talk on the importance of research to the FS.
- He also shared a 35-page paper on the topic (Handout #14). The paper is also posted on our website.

New Board Member Election – Becki Heath and Rich Guldin

- After 10 years on the Board, Rich is stepping down.
- The nominee for his replacement is Alex Friend.
- After some discussion on Alex, he was approved by the Board to replace Rich.

Bin Items

- Becki discussed our current “Standing Leads”. These are people (not necessarily Board members) that follow issues in specific categories -
 - Jerry Perez – NEPA
 - Jack Troyer – Public Lands
 - Marisue Hilliard – ESA (Endangered Species Act)
- There was also discussion about our current “Standing” committees. We currently have 4 committees – Climate, Recreation, and Fire, and Recognitions.
- We discussed adding committees for Employee Care and Communications. No decision was made.

Chair Closing Comments – Bill Avey

Bill provided a few closing comments and adjourned the meeting.

Next Board Meetings –

May 19 – Teresa, Jeanne, Becki – meeting planners

August 18 – Marisue, Jerry, Becki – meeting planners

November 17 – Frank, Debbie, Becki – meeting planners

Draft Notes by Johnny Hodges, 2/22/2026

Final edits, 2/25/2026