

January 8, 2019

Laura White
USDA Forest Service
300 W. Congress Street, 6th Floor
Tucson, Arizona 85701



Dear Laura,

All of us at the Arizona Trail Association (ATA) were disappointed to hear about the government shutdown and subsequent furlough of federal employees beginning December 22. Your email from December 21 passing along the recommendation from the Regional Office to cease all volunteer activities during the shutdown was appreciated, and we immediately notified staff, regional stewards, trail stewards, and the entire Arizona Trail community that no volunteerism should occur on public land until further notice. I doubt you'll have an opportunity to read this until after the shutdown ends and you're back at work, however I wanted to notify you and the four Forest Supervisors that I've made the decision to resume our Trail Operations activities effective tomorrow, January 9, 2019.

Please know this decision is not motivated by defiance or frustration, but rather a sense of responsibility as the partner organization that the US Forest Service has entrusted to maintain and protect the Arizona National Scenic Trail. With our successful 25-year history of accident-free volunteering on Forest lands, comprehensive trail stewardship program, professional staff oversight, and commitment to the highest safety and sustainability standards, the ATA has the capacity to continue our mission to protect, maintain, enhance, promote and sustain the Arizona Trail as a unique encounter with the land.

You and I have worked together to finalize Volunteer Agreements and Challenge Cost Share Agreements so that the ATA can continue our legacy of trail stewardship, and none of them contain language nullifying the agreement(s) in the event of a government shutdown. The ATA has a robust liability insurance package that covers our organization, agency partners (including the US Forest Service) and volunteers alike.

In addition, I received conflicting information from the Regional Office and one of our contacts within a Forest that communicated in advance of the shutdown. Your email recommended ceasing volunteer activities, but an email from a Deputy District Ranger on the same day stated, "Our volunteers, permit holders, and partners can continue with activities that do not require daily supervision from Forest Service personnel."

Even the Secretary of the Interior encouraged Americans to "grab a trash bag" if they visit National Parks during the shutdown. This is a call to action, not only for individuals to care for our national treasures, but to organizations like the ATA who can properly mobilize volunteers and provide safe and rewarding experiences for the benefit of public land. National news of trash piling up in National Parks is disturbing, and we're committed to making sure the equivalent doesn't happen on the Arizona Trail.

As you are aware, the ATA has worked hard to build a strong foundation of volunteers and instill a responsibility of stewardship within thousands of individuals. Denying volunteers an opportunity give their time and energy in the interest of preservation of the Arizona Trail is detrimental to the

Arizona Trail Association

534 N. Stone Avenue Tucson, Arizona 85705 (602) 252-4794 ata@aztrail.org www.aztrail.org

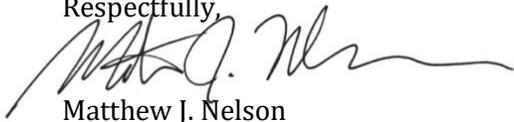
Arizona Trail Association, and more importantly, to the trail itself. This is especially true for events that have been scheduled for weeks or months, and that individuals have built into their lives. By turning these volunteers away now we risk losing them forever. We can no longer simply wait for the shutdown to end. Now, perhaps more than ever, the US Forest Service needs its partners and the ATA is stepping up to help.

Our plan is to continue with routine trail maintenance activities to keep volunteers engaged and excited about volunteering on public land. This will support the US Forest Service's 10 Year Sustainable Trail Stewardship Challenge and our collective goal to address the maintenance backlog on public land through volunteerism. A lack of US Forest Service personnel won't be a deterrent to our operations since federal employees have typically played a very minor role in the oversight of the ATA's volunteer activities.

We will also employ conservation corps to accomplish any priority projects set in motion before the shutdown. One of the unintended consequences of this unfortunate situation caused by our nation's leaders is the laying off of thousands of non-federal workers, including young people working for conservation corps nationwide. The conservation corps model is intended to teach the ethos of lifelong stewardship through experience, and this shutdown may sour many young people from pursuing a career in conservation and public land management. As a nation, this is something we cannot afford. The ATA will utilize private funds and the financial success of our year-end fundraising campaign to ensure these young people continue to work.

I hope this decision reaffirms your belief in the Arizona Trail Association. I look forward to working with you and other US Forest Service staff soon, and hope you personally recover from the negative impacts this is likely having on you and your family. Perhaps there is some consolation in knowing that the ATA will keep caring for the 800-mile resource we all hold so dear.

Respectfully,



Matthew J. Nelson
Executive Director

cc: Kerwin Dewberry, Forest Supervisor, Coronado National Forest
Neil Bosworth, Forest Supervisor, Tonto National Forest
Laura Jo West, Forest Supervisor, Coconino National Forest
Heather Provencio, Forest Supervisor, Kaibab National Forest