

August 10, 2012

TO: Harris Sherman, Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment, USDA
Tom Tidwell, Chief, U.S. Forest Service

FROM: American Fly Fishing Trade Association; American Fisheries Society; American Sportfishing Association; Berkley Conservation Institute, Pure Fishing; Trout Unlimited

RE: Forest Service Aquatic Organism Passage Program

Dear Undersecretary Sherman and Chief Tidwell,

We write as representatives of the fisheries community to express our support for the Forest Service's Aquatic Organism Passage Program and urge the USDA and Forest Service to find ways to continue the good work being done under the program. The recently passed transportation bill discontinued Highway Trust Funds for Aquatic Passage (HTAP), which had been an important source of funding for aquatic organism passage work. The loss of HTAP funding will reduce opportunities to improve fish passage, and will make it more important than ever before to foster partnerships that promote the progress of the Forest Service's aquatic organism passage program.

Healthy fisheries depend on clean water and quality habitat. In many areas, habitat fragmentation resulting from impassible road-stream crossings limits the productivity of fisheries in and around national forests. There are over 1.4 million stream crossings nationwide, with 20,000 on National Forest lands that are blocking fish passage. It is essential that these crossings are upgraded to allow fish access to spawning habitat as well as escape to better habitat during the course of floods, fires, drought, and other stressors.

The Forest Service has made tremendous progress in recent years addressing fish passage challenges. Of particular value has been the Forest Service's national weeklong training sessions in support of the Aquatic Organism Passage Program. These trainings bring together hydrologists, biologists, geologists, engineers, and other stream restoration professionals in order to teach them the principles and techniques of the Stream Simulation Design approach to restoring stream crossings. While many of the students are Forest Service employees, a wide variety of representatives from NGOs, State agencies, county and local governments, and other Federal agencies have benefited from the Forest Service's knowledge on the subject. By empowering partnerships these trainings advance the all-lands approach to conservation articulated by Secretary Vilsack and Chief Tidwell.

The skills acquired by trainees allow them to create stream crossings that simulate and match the natural stream, thereby allowing aquatic organisms to move throughout the watershed. Training sessions have helped promote important restoration projects in Eustache Creek on the Lolo National Forest, Canyon Creek on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, and many others.

As we seek to expand restoration partnerships with the Forest Service, we recognize a continued need for technical expertise in stream simulation design and design review. We are encouraged by the Forest Service's work to create an Aquatic Organism Passage Virtual Design Team to

provide assistance and expertise to project managers and engineers around the country in designing and implementing successful stream crossing projects. The team would conduct webinars and virtual trainings, as well as provide guidance and review on individual project design planning and contracting management. This is a cost effective approach, because the cost for assistance with multiple projects in the design stage is far less than the cost of just one failed project. The proposed Aquatic Organism Passage Virtual Design Team would also fill a large void in engineering design that currently is limiting implementation of projects for many partners across the country.

We strongly support the Aquatic Organism Passage Virtual Design Team and the training sessions provided by the Forest Service. While we recognize the difficulties facing the agency as a result of reduced appropriations and the discontinuation of HTAP in the new transportation bill, we hope that the Forest Service will find a way to continue the work of its Aquatic Organism Passage Program through training and technical assistance to foster continued partnership-driven work to improve fish passage.

Sincerely,

Ben Bulis
General Manager
American Fly Fishing Trade Association

Gus Rassam, PhD.
Executive Director
American Fisheries Society

Gordon Robertson
Vice President
American Sportfishing Association

Jim Martin
Conservation Director
Berkley Conservation Institute, Pure Fishing

Steve Moyer
Vice President of Government Affairs
Trout Unlimited