Today’s Forest Service is not what it used to be. One major (and underappreciated) problem is that the agency doesn’t have enough employees to do the work necessary to fulfill its multiple-use management obligations.

Decades of growing wildfire fighting costs combined with decades of shrinking budgets for basic agency functions have produced an untenable situation for the stewardship and management of our national forests.

For example, in 1995 the fire program made up just 16% of the Forest Service’s annual budget. Today, over half of the Forest Service’s budget is directed to the fire program. This shift in resources has led to a corresponding shift in staffing. Since the early ’90’s, the number of Forest Service firefighters has risen 132% while the number of foresters, forestry engineers, biologists and other Forest Service personnel has
decreased by 39%. Strikingly, the number of professional foresters employed by the Forest Service has declined by 74% in the past 26 years. Currently, the non-fire Forest Service workforce is at its lowest in years.

This doesn’t leave enough people in the Forest Service’s workforce for the agency to maintain roads and trails, monitor wildlife, plan vegetation projects, improve campgrounds and do the environmental analyses that new projects require.

It’s the reason your favorite campground, road or trail may have been closed or fallen into disrepair, and why the Forest Service is unable to meet its forest restoration goals. They can’t effectively address the threat of wildfire in the wildland urban interface without additional funding in order to hire more forestry technicians and biologists to specifically address these restoration needs.

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) recently released a report detailing Forest Service workforce capacity needs. (Sustaining the Forest Service; Increasing Workforce Capacity, found at https://www.nafsr.org/advocacy/2019/072619%20Workforce%20Capacity%20Study.pdf)

NAFSR interviewed agency employees across the country. The key finding: The Forest Service is struggling to meet its management responsibilities because it simply does not have the staff, especially resource specialists like foresters and biologists, required to do the work that needs to be done.

NAFSR has presented their findings to the very highest ranks of the Forest Service, the Department of Agriculture, and the president. As a collaborative that works closely with the Custer Gallatin National Forest, the Custer Gallatin Working Group has a front-row seat to how the Forest Service operates in this part of Montana. We’ve had many discussions with Forest Service staff about how a lack of capacity hobbles the agency and prevents them from achieving their management goals. For example, the Custer Gallatin National Forest only has the capacity to
take on one vegetation management project per year, despite the pressing need to address insect and disease outbreaks and hazardous fuels across the 3.2 million-acre forest.

We have reviewed the NAFSR report and agree with its findings.

Congress and the Department of Agriculture need to better fund the Forest Service in order for the agency to do this important work. We expect a lot from our national forests — clean water, natural resources to support local economies, habitat for healthy wildlife populations, and trails and areas in which to pursue all of our favorite outdoor recreation activities. This is why the Custer Gallatin Working Group is calling upon Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester, along with Congressman Greg Gianforte, to work with their colleagues on the Hill to increase funding for the Forest Service so that it can increase its workforce capacity. This is the only way the Forest Service will be able to meet the demands placed upon it, including increasing the pace and scale of restoration.

National Forest lands support our Montana way of life in many ways — from lifestyles to livelihoods. These lands are the backbone of Montana’s economy, including timber, mining, grazing, and outdoor recreation. We need to invest in the Forest Service so these lands are properly cared for today and into the future.

John E. Prinkki is the chair of Custer Gallatin Working Group. The group represents a wide range of stakeholder interests in the management of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The 24 designated seats on the collaborative include county commissioners, representatives from multiple-use and conservation organizations, the ski industry, agriculture and ranching, quiet and motorized recreation, hunting and angling, outfitters, mining, economic development and the timber industry.