

WAG Tales



NEWSLETTER OF THE CHIEF S WILDERNESS ADVISORY GROUP (WAG)

FALL/WINTER 2020

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Rediscovering the Wild in 2020

By Chris Engelhardt, R5 WAG Rep

As I stretched out upon a solar infused granite slab within the John Muir Wilderness, sparkling water washed away months of pressured and uncertain times. It was not only the crisp plunge, but the natural wildness and the residing stillness of an ancient landscape that loosened the tightness of lines around my



eyes. Spring of 2020, for me, and so many others, was a brave new world of virtual meetings, too much screen time, and worry over protecting my elderly father. COVID is cruel. It travels along its relentless path, affecting us all, but alternatively it also has been the driving force inspiring more people to connect to nature and their Wilderness heritage. The National Wilderness Preservation System saw a dramatic increase in visitation this year with many visiting a designated wilderness area for the first time, and many re-discovering how wonderful a trip to one of these special places can be. Here, in the Sierra Nevada, we observed a significant uptick in visitation over the summer, particularly day-use in the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wilderness areas. Our Wilderness Ranger staff had countless interactions with hikers who shared that their hike or backpacking trip had opened up a new sense of discovery and excitement to connecting with nature and exploring incredible landscapes. I spoke with two middle aged fellows fishing in a stream one evening, and they told me how they hadn't been backpacking since they were 16. Upon "getting back out" they remembered how much fun it was and that they were already planning next summer's backpack.

This field season above any other, solidified my belief that trails, unconfined wild nature, and the idea of wilderness itself, are fundamentally essential to maintaining our collective health and spirit. One of the primary themes of the Interagency Vision forged at the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act was the importance of connecting citizens to Wilderness. If anything good can be made of the challenges facing us it is that we, as Wilderness stewards, have been given a massive opportunity to foster wilderness visitors towards responsible behaviors that improve wilderness stewardship for everyone and for everything dependent on these lands. This summer, when the rangers would return from the mountains, a bit of dirt around the collar, a smudge of coal upon the cheek, and an overwhelmed stare, I'd ask, "did you make a connection with somebody? Did you, through your own creativity help guide those campers to a more durable camp?" Invariably, yes they had, and the positive outcomes outweighed the challenges. How important are the cumulative effects of those little wilderness morsels given out every day a wilderness steward is out there...priceless!

The WAG looks forward to representing you all in the new year where Wilderness is Yours: to Enjoy and Protect.

Wilderness Advisory Group Task Team Updates

Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) Funding

Proposals to fund FY20 and FY21 Wilderness Stewardship Performance measures across the National Forest System were reviewed by the WAG. Proposals were rated by members on the reasonableness of funding requests and feasibility of proposed projects.

In FY20, \$2.2 million was allocated to 57 proposals. Funding was sent to 51 different forests for 194 different wilderness areas. This funding was matched by local units, partners, and volunteers by 125% potentially resulting in considerable gains in Wilderness Stewardship Performance scores.

This past April and early May, the WAG reviewed 77 proposals for FY21 and the results are still pending due to budget modernization efforts at the time of this article's publication. Wilderness Character Baseline work was the most commonly addressed element with 136 wilderness areas applying for funding. Education, Air Quality, Recreation sites, Trails, and Invasive Species were also commonly addressed elements.

It has been educational and inspiring to learn about the variety of stewardship challenges and solutions that wilderness managers are addressing.

For many of us, WSP funding is increasingly relied upon as the primary means of accomplishing important stewardship work and maintaining a field presence in the Wilderness. The WAG is grateful for the opportunity to support through WSP and we hope it continues in the years to come!

Wilderness Education

For many wilderness stewards in the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management and the US Fish and Wildlife Service Wilderness Connect is the "go to" location when looking for resources.

The WAG and WIMST Wilderness Education Task teams (WE) are working together to update and modernize the Wilderness Ranger Toolbox. This toolbox and many others are located on the Wilderness Connect website. In conjunction, the WIMST Education Task Team committed to explore and collect available resources to update the Wilderness Ranger Toolbox on the Wilderness Connect website and to complete a review of existing resources in the Toolbox.

The process included each member of the WE Task Team reaching out to all 10 regions in the National Forest System to gather existing and current information either on-line, through phone calls or in their own files to gather potential resources for the Wilderness Ranger Toolbox. A total of two hundred and twenty five resources were collected by the teams. The WE Task Team discovered creative and well thought out presentations, curriculums and agendas for internal unit training, volunteer and partner training and large regional gatherings.

Currently, the information collected is waiting for review from WIMST to determine which resources will be included in the Wilderness Ranger toolbox. The WIMST team will work closely with the Arthur Carhart Center to ensure all information meets their criteria. WIMST will continue this task team project into 2021.

Wilderness Advisory Group Task Team Updates

Wilderness Workforce

The Task Team worked on internal briefing information around workforce capacity issues and potential solutions or best practices for maintaining an effective wilderness workforce. The task team gathered information from regional wilderness leads about (1) wilderness workforce capacity challenges, (2) the accuracy of the WSP workforce capacity element to reflect on-the-ground needs, (3) consequences of the lack of wilderness workforce capacity, (4) benefits of an adequate workforce, and (5) effective solutions. Dwindling workforce capacity is a common theme in Wilderness Areas across the country. Wilderness has become, in many places, a collateral duty and knowledge of traditional skills is being lost. The adequacy of the WSP workforce capacity measure to reflect the needs varies by region. The benefits of a strong wilderness workforce are clear: maintaining and improving wilderness character, delivering benefits to the public, education, protection, expertise. Secure funding for wilderness is key, but solutions also involve partnerships, career ladder positions, use of resource assistants.

Wilderness Permit Systems

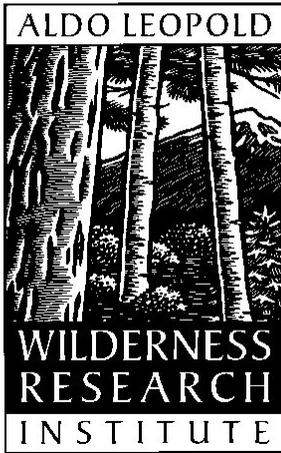
The Task Team developed a Wilderness Permit System Checklist for wilderness managers and specialists to begin development of a voluntary permit system. The checklist is meant as a starting place and provides points to consider when starting a wilderness permit system. The team interviewed and spoke with many wilderness managers which have current voluntary permit systems. The team discovered many of the managers are no longer using the volunteer self-registration to calculate visitor use, because of the lack of Forest Service resources and/or volunteers to complete compliance checks to validate visitor use. The team compiled information on three additional methods to collect visitor use information: Trail Counters, Social Media, and Citizen Science. More information can be found on the [National Wilderness Program SharePoint Site](#).



Pictured: Bristlecone Pines from Boundary Peak Wilderness, Inyo National Forest, Nevada

Photos by Chris Engelhardt, R5 WAG Rep





Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute leopold.wilderness.net

The Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute (ALWRI), part of Rocky Mountain Research Station, is an interagency federal research facility located on the campus of the University of Montana. **Our mission is to provide scientific leadership in developing and using the knowledge needed to sustain wilderness and wildlands ecosystems and values.** Therefore, we work to provide high quality, credible science that responds to priority needs of wilderness managers, planners, and wilderness organizations—while advancing scientific scholarship. Leopold Institute scientists have a long history of supporting managers stewarding the U.S. National Wilderness Preservation System.

In 2020, ALWRI welcomed a new Director, Research Social Scientist, and Research Biologist. We also said farewell to an Assistant Director and a Senior Research Social Scientist. Beth Hahn transferred to the USFS Office of International Programs in November of 2019 to serve the Forest Service' international mission, and Alan Watson retired in May 2020 after 35 years of federal service.

Dr. Jason Taylor joined ALWRI in July of 2020 as director after nearly twenty years of federal and local government service. Most recently, he was superintendent at Klondike Gold Rush NHP, an international protected area, and the most visited National Park Service (NPS) unit in Alaska. Jason also led the NPS Alaska Region, Natural Resource Science and Management Team, and provided natural resource stewardship support for 24 national park units (totaling 52 million acres) across Alaska. In the recent past, Jason was Co-Lead for the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program, an international organization that addresses Arctic biodiversity conservation. Jason's research efforts have focused on landscape ecology, multi-scale ecosystem-based monitoring programs, and understanding ecological integrity. In addition to providing leadership for ALWRI, he is looking forward to championing research that helps to ensure wilderness is relevant to everyone and finding ways to harmonize multiple knowledge systems and philosophies toward more inclusive and effective stewardship of wilderness protected areas.

Dr. Christopher Armatas joined ALWRI in March of 2020 as a research social scientist after nearly ten years of science collaboration with ALWRI. Since 2018, Chris was sponsored by ALWRI as an Oak Ridge Institute of Science and Education Research Fellow, which provided the opportunity to lead the application of a climate and land use change assessment for Comprehensive River Management Planning for the Flathead Wild & Scenic River. As a doctoral student at The University of Montana, Chris received the Chief's wilderness science application award for his efforts to archive 50 years of wilderness research for the Leopold Institute. In addition, his research focused generally on human-nature relationships will support physical and behavioral capacity determination in wildlands, provide science input to recreation use and monitoring issues, and aim to meet the social science priorities wilderness and wild & scenic river managers and planners.

Dr. Katherine Zeller has over 15 years of experience as a spatial ecologist. It was during Kathy's first field job in the vast wildlands of Alaska, that she became inspired to work to protect wild places and the unique resources and benefits they confer. Since this time, Kathy's research has focused on understanding and quantifying how patterns and processes of human-driven disturbance and climate change affect wildlife populations and large ecological networks. Kathy is particularly interested in modeling connectivity within and among protected lands and in providing spatial products and decision-support tools that are useful to managers and stakeholders.

With new people come new perspective and ideas and personalities. There is a feeling of camaraderie and a sense of hope and opportunity for what we can achieve as a team. Our talented new staff, along with our exceptional, current staff will be key to accomplishing our science-to-stewardship agenda in the coming years.



Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center

carhart.wilderness.net

The Mission is to equip and inspire agency leaders and partners to ensure that America's National Wilderness Preservation System endures for future generations. We do this through training, information, and education.

Our Goals:

- Improve consistency and collaboration in on-the-ground wilderness decisions among managers, stewardship skills among wilderness staff, and wilderness awareness among agency employees through training.
- Enhance communication and consultation among the natural resource workforce, scientists, educators, students, and the public through ready access to a broad base of current and timely wilderness information.
- Foster development of a personal stewardship ethic, and support for the National Wilderness Preservation System among the American public by increasing awareness, knowledge, and understanding of their wilderness heritage through education.
- Increase worldwide capacity for protected area management through training, information and education.
- Increase awareness and support of Carhart Center efforts among all levels of the wilderness-managing agencies and partner organizations.

As our world has changed due to COVID-19 so has Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. Starting in March 2020 we began cancelling or postponing in person trainings and re-evaluated the center's program of work. The staff focused on some of those not so glorious administrative tasks and, most importantly, are looking to the future and learning new ways to continue providing the highest quality Wilderness training. Please remember the [Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center](http://carhart.wilderness.net) is here for you. The Center offers dozens of online training courses, webinars, toolboxes with valuable agency guidance and best practices, links to find specific Wilderness information/enabling legislation and maps, and more not to mention the individual Wilderness knowledge and experience of the Centers' staff.

Change is Happening... In October of 2020 the Center permanently filled the Director and Forest Service Representative positions. This has added new energy and excitement for staff to equip and inspire employees and partners, facilitate Wilderness knowledge and connection, cultivate the next generation of Wilderness Stewards, and model inter-agency excellence.

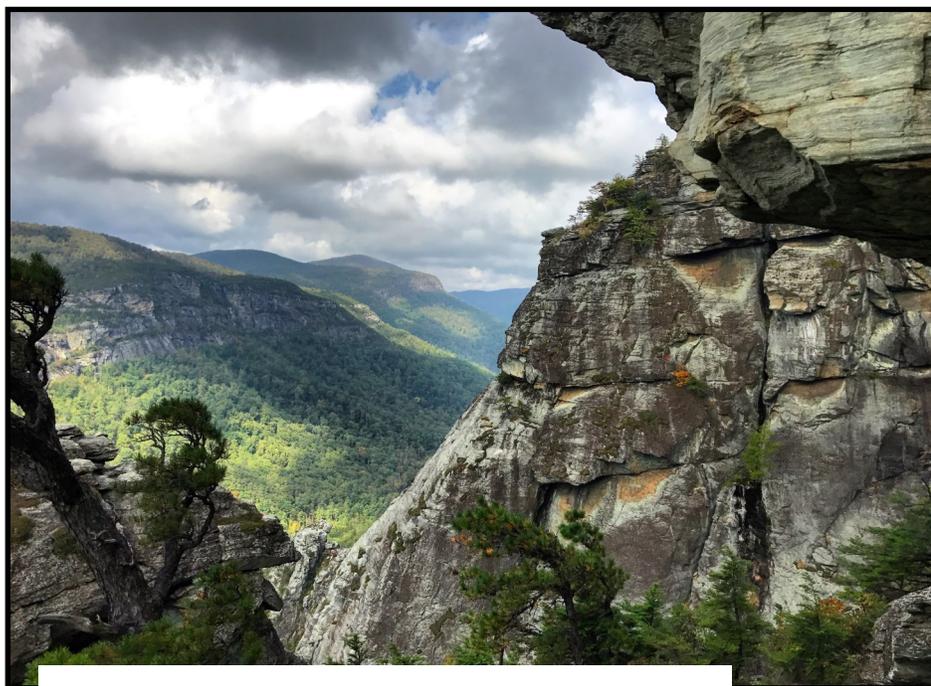
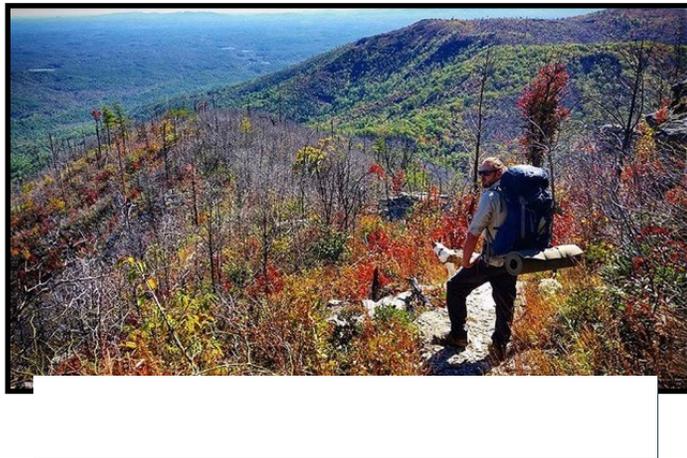
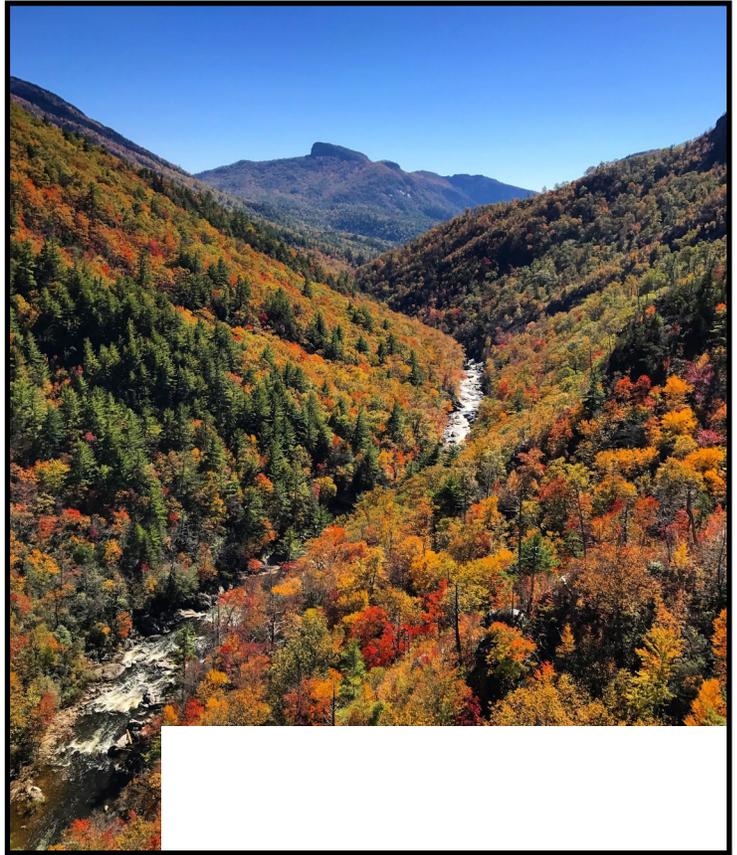
[Katie Bliss](mailto:Katie.Bliss@usda.gov) joined the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center in the Fall of 2020 as its Director. Katie previously served as the Training Manager for Interpretation and Education at the National Park Service's Stephen T. Mather Training Center in Harpers Ferry, WV. Her experience includes working as a trainer and instructional designer on the instructional team at Indiana University's Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands. She has a BS in Wildlife Ecology with minors in Forestry and Zoology and an MS in Resource Education. Katie can be reached at Katie.Bliss@usda.gov or (406) 243-4654 desk, (301) 508-0101.

[J. Dan Abbe](mailto:James.Abbe@usda.gov) joined the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center in the Fall of 2020 as the Forest Service Representative. He has worked in wilderness stewardship for the Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management while living all over the US including New Hampshire, Alaska, California, North Carolina, and Arkansas. He holds a BS in Business (UMD), MS in Natural Resource Planning (UVM), and an MBA (PSU). Dan can be reached at James.Abbe@usda.gov or (406) 243-4630 desk, (603) 348-0212.

PHOTO FEATURE: Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, North Carolina,

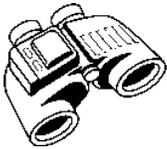
Established 1964 — 12,000 acres

Sitting at the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Linville River cuts 2,000 feet below the mountain rim through a gorge of rock and lush forests. Called Esseoh by the Cherokee meaning “river of many cliffs.”



Wilderness Character Monitoring Update

The Forest Service is in its 3rd year of establishing Wilderness Character Baseline Assessments for all wilderness units. There were originally 91 units scheduled for FY19 and 90 units scheduled for FY20. There was some delay with furlough last year and now COVID this year but making steady progress. The plan is still to have all baselines completed by 2023 so that trend assessments can start for the 5 year time frames.



What is WCM?

Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) is one of the required elements of Wilderness Stewardship Performance. The main goal of WCM is to confirm Wilderness Character is being preserved by the four managing agencies (FS, NPS, USFWS, and BLM) per the 1964 Wilderness Act. To accomplish this, baselines of Wilderness character are currently being established that will be revisited in 5-years to analyze trends in Wilderness character. WCM is therefore a tool to confirm the preservation or degradation of each congressionally established Wilderness area within the entire National Wilderness Preservation System. The process for this is broken down into several “point based” steps: 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 points, respectively.

The first step of WCM (2 points) is to gather all legislative and administrative documents pertaining to a certain Wilderness area and organize them by Quality (Untrammelled, Natural, Undeveloped, Opportunities for Solitude and Unconfined and Primitive Recreation, Other Features of Value) into a central repository. This can be done concurrently with the next step of the process, the 4-point Wilderness Character Narrative. This document should be a holistic, affirmative description of the Wilderness. This is where many intangible, non-quantifiable aspects of a Wilderness can be addressed.

Next is the 6-point step, selecting measures for WCM. There are 28 measures to choose from, 15 of which are required to be selected. Measures represent the quantifiable aspects of the Wilderness, such as acres of inholdings and number of yearly trammeling actions. Data is collected for each selected measure and then compiled into the 8-point step, the Baseline Assessment Report. This report is the culmination of the previous steps and acts to establish the baseline state of Wilderness character for a particular year.

The last step of WCM (10 point) occurs 5-years after the baseline assessment report has been written and approved. This is called the trend assessment and provides the managing agency the opportunity to examine how well they have been preserving Wilderness Character during that 5 year period. This is done by analyzing the trends for each measure and reporting whether or not that measure degraded, improved or remained the same. For example, if the data showed an increase in the percentage of non-indigenous vegetation within the Wilderness from the baseline year 5-years prior, that measure would be considered to have degraded. A manager can then add all of the measures for each Quality to report the overall trend in the respective Wilderness, which can then be done for every Wilderness in a Region and eventually the entire National Wilderness Preservation System.

Wilderness Information Management Steering Team



Photo from 2019 fall meeting.

Front – Kate de Verona (SAWS), Casey Quarterman (SAWS), Eric Sandeno (WO), Stacy Duke (R9), Colter Pence (R1), Pat McGervey (R3)

Middle - Karisa Garner (R10), Charis Parker (R5), Sue Spear (WO - retired), Dr. Troy Hall (OR State University), Justin Ewer (R6), Andrea Maichak (R2), Tim Eling (R8)

Back – Julie King (WO), Kevin Cannon (R2 – retired), Zach Maughan (R4), **Not pictured** - Portia Jelinek (NRM)

The Wilderness Information Management Steering Team (WIMST) “met” virtually in November 2020 to develop the FY21 program of work. Below are a few highlighted task teams. For a full list of projects WIMST will be working on in FY21, please visit [the Wilderness Information Management Steering Team SharePoint site](#)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

This task team will work with a variety of diverse staff groups to review materials on Wilderness Connect. The final product will be to create a new toolbox, update existing toolboxes, and review/update other resources for managers to ensure perspectives towards diversity, equity, and inclusion are properly addressed on the interagency website.

Wilderness Stewardship Performance (WSP) Webinars

The WSP Webinars task team will continue to provide outstanding informational/educational webinars on WSP elements. Webinars for all 20 elements will be presented over the next few years. Completed webinars have been recorded and posted to the WSP SharePoint Site, Wilderness Connect, and the NRM Support site for wilderness. Existing webinars will be reviewed and updated as needed.

Wilderness Connect Toolbox update

In coordination with Wilderness Connect webmaster Lisa Ronald, the wonderful staff at the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and the Wilderness Advisory Group, this task team will work to refine and update the Ranger Toolbox and the Signs and Posters Toolbox. Emphasis will be placed on providing resources to assist the field with virtual wilderness ranger and volunteer training in preparation for the FY21 field season.

Agency Management Actions WSP Element

This task team will fine tune the Agency Management Action WSP element. Work will include refining/clarifying definition in for the WSP Guidebook, adding FAQ’s to describe what qualifies as an “approved” action, describe how to handle approved actions not acted upon, and improve the connection between WSP and WCM. Additional samples of “annual reports” will be added to the tools and templates WSP SharePoint site.

Pandemic Public Use and Impacts to Wilderness

Public Lands experienced high visitor use during the COVID-19 pandemic. What are the impacts? Who are our new users? How do we connect with our new users? How do we protect the needs of the resource and longtime wilderness users? This task team will look at the statistics available and work with the Wilderness Advisory Group and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute to provide resources to the field in preparation for the FY21 field season.

Get to Know Your Local WAG Representative

The Chief's Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG) was established in 1989 for the purpose of providing advice and counsel to the Chief of the Forest Service, from the perspective of field level managers, on matters related to wilderness stewardship. WAG consists of one field-based manager from each Region, as well as representatives from the Washington Office, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.



In Fall 2019, the WAG held its annual program of work meeting in Milford, Pennsylvania at the historic Grey Towers, also known as Gifford Pinchot House or The Pinchot Institute.

Left to Right: Jeremy Evans (outgoing R4), Tom Fouts (outgoing R8), Miguel Macias (outgoing R5), Jonathan Erickson (outgoing R6), Del Orme (R4), Kelly Pearson (R9), Allison Ayers (R3), Sandy Skrien (retired WO), Chrissy Post (R10), Josh Lattin (R1), Tangy Wiseman (WO), Sara Erickson (R2), Dusty Vaughn (WO)

Current WAG Representatives:

Region 1: [Josh Lattin](#) (Chair)

Lincoln R.D., Helena N.F.

Region 2: [Sara Erickson](#)

Hell Canyon R.D., Black Hills N.F.

Region 3: [Allison Ayers](#)

North Kaibab R.D., Kaibab N.F.

Region 4: [Del Orme](#) (Vice Chair)

Cedar City RD, Dixie N.F.

Region 5: [Chris Engelhardt](#)

White Mountain R.D., Inyo N.F.

Region 6: [Jason Fisher](#)

Deschutes National Forest

Region 8: [Lisa Jennings](#)

Grandfather R.D., Pisgah N.F.

Region 9: [Kelly Pearson](#)

Poplar Bluff R.D., Mark Twain N.F.

Region 10: [Chrissy Post](#)

Admiralty Island National Monument,
Tongass N.F.

Washington Office: [Peter Mali](#), [Dusty Vaughn](#), [Tangy Wiseman](#), WWSR Staff

Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center:
[J Dan Abbe](#), Forest Service Representative

Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute:
[Christopher Armatas](#), Research Social Scientist