February 4, 2020

The Honorable Peter DeFazio
Chairman
Committee on
Transportation & Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sam Graves
Ranking Member

Dear Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves:

As the Committee works to assemble a highway bill that modernizes our transportation infrastructure, the undersigned groups are writing to urge you to address a pressing issue that is vital to the millions of Americans who benefit from the many uses and products that healthy, well managed national forests can provide. A sound road system is needed to help prevent damage to vital water provisions and to provide recreation, forestry and fire fighting access that are key to rural economies and downstream urban citizens.

The recently released “Moving Forward Framework” acknowledges the need to ramp up funding for the Federal Lands Transportation Program. As the Committee crafts the bill, we urge you to direct a more equitable portion of the Federal Land Transportation Assistance Program to the extensive National Forest System (NFS) road network. The road system managed by the USDA Forest Service has over 370,000 miles of roads. The agency estimates its backlog at $3 billion just for the approximately 65,000 miles of passenger car accessible roads, which only represents under 18 percent of the entire NFS road system.

Much of the current road system was built and maintained from timber receipts, a model that was viable when the Forest Service sold a much larger and much more valuable timber program. This timber sale program generated more than $50 million a year in funding for road construction, maintenance, and repair, and many years produced well over $100 million. In more recent years, these funds have usually been well below $20 million annually.

The other funding stream available for maintenance and repair of the NFS roads is discretionary appropriations. Discretionary funding for roads has stagnated since 2010. The Roads program was funded at $235 million in FY
2009. By FY 2017, funding had dropped to $175 million. In Fiscal Year 2018, the $40 million “Legacy Roads & Trails” program was folded into the CI&M-Roads line. Adjusting for inflation, discretionary funding for road repair, maintenance, and reconstruction is down by almost 38 percent since FY 2009.

As you know, the Federal Lands Transportation Program provides annual mandatory funding to five Interior agencies and the USDA Forest Service. The Forest Service only receives about seven percent of these funds, even though it’s road system is considerably larger than the other federal land management agencies combined. The NFS roads, as noted, includes 65,000 miles of passenger vehicle accessible roads. This is almost six times as many miles of roads as the National Park Service, which receives 80 percent of Federal Land Transportation Program funding. Overall, according to the National Parks Conservation Association, roads, bridges, and parking areas account for 52 percent of the overall Park Service Maintenance Backlog; this amounts to $6.2 billion. The Forest Service maintenance backlog is $5.2 billion and the roads backlog of $3 billion only for under 18 percent of the NFS roads system. The backlog would be significantly bigger if the agency were to include the remaining more-than 305,000 miles of system roads and 60,000 miles of unclassified roads.

The undersigned groups urge you to use the upcoming highway and infrastructure legislation to significantly increase the available funding for the Forest Service in this program to address the disparity and meet public needs for recreational, firefighting, and resource management access.

Sincerely,

Federal Forest Resource Coalition
The Nature Conservancy
Public Lands Council
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Forest Resources Association

National Wildlife Federation
National Association of State Foresters
National Cattelmen’s Beef Association