

A New Chapter for the Forest Service — But Only If We Get It Right

The U.S. Forest Service is undertaking the most significant structural overhaul in its 121-year history. Headquarters will relocate from Washington, D.C. to Salt Lake City. Regional offices will shut down. A new state-based system will have 15 state directors across the country, and operational service centers will take on functions that were previously managed by large regional bureaucracies. The goal is clear: bring leadership closer to the forests and communities the agency serves.

On paper, this presents a compelling vision. Nearly 90 percent of Forest Service lands are west of the Mississippi, and for decades, critics from both parties have argued that an agency headquartered in the nation's capital is structurally disconnected from the landscapes it manages and the people who live among them. If this reorganization lives up to its promise of quicker decisions, stronger local partnerships, and a leaner chain of command, it could represent a real turning point.

But structural reform, no matter how ambitious, is only as effective as the principles that guide it. As the Forest Service undergoes this period of upheaval, there are four imperatives — four pillars that the National Wildfire Alliance has long supported — that must not be overshadowed by the logistics of relocation and reorganization. If anything, this transition makes them even more urgent, not less.

The first priority is community safety and preparedness. The reorganization's architects emphasize connecting with communities. That language is positive, but proximity without a clear purpose is just geography. The communities most at risk from devastating wildfire — small towns in the wildland-urban interface, rural neighborhoods surrounded by overgrown federal land, tribal communities managing fire with limited budgets — need more than a state director with a shorter commute. They require education, prevention tools, defensible space training, clear evacuation instructions, and ongoing engagement that builds real readiness. As Forest Service leadership moves into new offices and service centers, the agency must make sure that community preparedness is not seen as a secondary task left to whoever remains after the reorganization chaos. Enabling communities to defend themselves before the flames arrive is not optional. It is the mission.

The second priority is policy and transparency. Such a large-scale reorganization will result in thousands of decisions related to staffing, budgets, facility closures, research priorities, and operational authority. Each of these decisions will impact wildfire management for years to come. The public has the right to understand how these decisions are made, who makes them, and what tradeoffs are involved. History shows that during times of institutional upheaval, transparency often diminishes — when decisions are rushed, made behind closed doors, and justified as part of a "transition." The Forest Service must avoid falling into that trap. Budget plans, staffing strategies, and policy changes should be clearly documented, explained, and

accessible to the public in straightforward language. Wildfire governance must be transparent and accountable, especially now.

The third principle is truth and accountability. Behind every devastating wildfire is a network of decisions, delays, and incentive structures that determine the outcome. Who decided not to thin that forest? Who postponed the initial attack? Who allocated the suppression budget in a way that left one district short while another sat idle? These are not just abstract policy questions; they are life-and-death questions for those living in fire-prone areas. As the Forest Service reorganizes leadership, closes offices, and consolidates functions, there is a real risk that institutional memory will be lost, accountability gaps will widen, and the investigative trail linking decisions to results will become more difficult to follow. The new state-based model must be designed with accountability integrated from the start, not added as an afterthought. The public has a right to clear information about what works, what fails, and why.

The fourth is land stewardship. Healthy forests are the most effective firebreaks ever created, and they need active, thoughtful care. The reorganization aims to bring decision-makers closer to the land. This is an opportunity to promote stewardship practices rooted in science, community experience, and Indigenous knowledge — including cultural burning, ecological thinning, habitat restoration, and nature-based solutions that genuinely lower wildfire risk. However, it also presents a risk. A state-based model focused mainly on timber production goals and political targets could sideline the stewardship methods that build long-term forest resilience. The Forest Service must ensure that its new structure empowers land managers to do what is ecologically correct, not just what is politically convenient.

This reorganization will succeed or fail depending on whether it benefits the people and landscapes that rely on the Forest Service — or simply rearranges the bureaucracy without addressing the core issues. The four pillars of community safety, policy transparency, truth and accountability, and land stewardship are not partisan principles. They form the foundation of responsible wildfire governance. As the Forest Service writes its next chapter from Salt Lake City, these principles must be clear on every page.