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'I'm worried,' former forest supervisor says about staff cut impacts on stewardship

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May 17, 2025



Dennis Webb/The Daily Sentinel

From left, Brien Webster with Conservation Colorado, former White River National Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams and Angie Timm with the Grand Junction company Seek Outside gather at the Rifle Garfield County Airport on Friday before flying over lands Fitzwilliams used to manage. Fitzwilliams is concerned about staffing cuts to the Forest Service and what they could mean for the future.

Dennis Webb/The Daily Sentinel

Scott Fitzwilliams had expected to retire as supervisor of the White River National Forest about this time next year, and he used to think about spending his last day on the job flying over the forest he managed, just quietly taking in what he was seeing.

On Friday, he took a flight over the forest, but not as its supervisor. Instead it was an opportunity for a former Forest Service employee to express his concerns about staffing cuts to the agency and what they could mean at a time when Congress is considering selling off some public lands.

After a career that included more than 15 years as the White River forest supervisor and nearly 35 years with the Forest Service, Fitzwilliams opted to accept an early retirement offer as the Trump administration has sought to sharply reduce staff in many federal agencies.

He still sometimes talks about the White River as “my forest,” though, and worries about its future and the future of national forests and other public lands more generally given the cutbacks that are being made.



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“What I’m worried about right now is basically (forest) stewardship, management, that I don’t know how will get done without at least a reasonable level of staffing to do it,” he said.

Fitzwilliams spoke Friday at the Rifle Garfield County Airport and during an overflight of forest lands to the east of it that was provided by the EcoFlight nonprofit group. The outing was timed in part to coincide with Colorado Public Lands Day, which is today. The day has taken on added significance for conservationists this year after the House Natural Resources Committee recently approved a budget measure that included an amendment providing for the sale of thousands of acres of federal lands in Nevada and Utah.

Activists today are holding an event called “Beers, Bands, and a Stand for Public Lands” from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the Copper Club Brewing Company in Fruita. The event’s focus is the threats to public lands, including the danger of selloffs, and the impact of federal employee reductions.

Fitzwilliams, state Rep. Rick Taggart, R-Grand Junction, and Grand Valley Outdoor Recreation Coalition founder Sarah Shrader will be among the speakers. The event is free and people can RSVP at <https://www.keepitpublic.co/517-grand-junction>.



Scott Fitzwilliams, right, former White River National Forest supervisor, views forest lands he used to manage Friday during an EcoFlight tour piloted by Gary Kraft, right. Fitzwilliams is worried about the potential impacts to the forest from staffing cuts.

Dennis Webb/The Daily Sentinel

“I think a lot of us live here because of public lands, frankly,” said Brien Webster of Grand Junction, who is public lands campaign manager for Conservation Colorado. “We’ve heard the refrain again and again, Colorado wouldn’t be Colorado without it.”

“Public lands is my business,” said Angie Timm, president and owner of the Seek Outside outdoors gear company in Grand Junction, as she joined Webster and others on Friday’s flight to promote the value of public lands and keeping them in the public’s hands.

She said she grew up in south Texas, where there wasn’t so much public land to use, and she feels honored to get to use such lands now.

“It would be devastating to lose,” Timm said.

Webster said that besides being worried about possible public land sales, he is gravely concerned about the reductions in force in federal public land agencies during the Trump administration, including the loss of people with years of experience and specialized training.



Colorado joins lawsuit against Trump Administration regarding AmeriCorps cuts
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“We’ve lost just incredible amounts of knowledge and expertise,” he said.

Fitzwilliams, flying Friday over the scars of the 2020 Grizzly Creek Fire in Glenwood Canyon and the 2018 Lake Christine Fire near Basalt, worries what impact the loss of people experienced in fire management may have on future wildfire responses.

More broadly, while he no longer has inside knowledge of what could happen within the Forest Service, he said he expects close to 7,000 of the agency’s 15,000 or 16,000 nonfire employees to be gone from the Forest Service by later this year. He said when he gets up in an airplane and flies over the forest, he sees both awe-inspiring landscapes and multiple uses such as oil and gas activity, logging, livestock grazing and recreation. Nonfire personnel such as biologists, range technicians and oil and gas administrators work to bring those uses together in a sustainable way, he said.

“When you overnight cut half the staff that do that it’s hard not to be concerned about the future,” he said.



Photo by Lea Linse-Hirro/EcoFlight

Logged areas are visible in part of the White River National Forest during an EcoFlight aerial tour Friday. Former White River National Forest supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams, who participated in Friday's flight, worries how staffing cuts could affect the many uses of the forest.

Photo by Lea Linse-Hirro/EcoFlight

In the White River National Forest, the number of nonfire staff has fallen from about close to 160 people about a year ago to about 100 the last he had heard, Fitzwilliams said.

Forest employees do field work such as maintaining trails, cleaning up garbage, putting out abandoned campfires that can start wildfires, and doing ecological monitoring of forests, he noted.

Jobs cuts in such areas are "worrisome and I know that the Forest Service is going into the field season with little to no field presence whatsoever," he said.

He also worries about the agency's ability to do longer-term planning in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, and its ability to properly interact with forest users and the general public when it comes to overseeing things such as logging, oil and gas activity, outfitter permits and more. Fitzwilliams said he doesn't think wholesale auctioning off of public lands is

around the corner, but he sees the public becoming frustrated over the agency's inability to perform its stewardship function. That could lead to a discussion that if the Forest Service can't properly manage lands, someone else should, he said.



Hurd joins Dems in calling for rehiring of wildfire-qualified national forest staff

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"It would be a tragedy to not steward (the lands) and manage them and invest in them in a manner that is reciprocal to the way these lands give back to the American public," Fitzwilliams said.

"... If we don't have the people and the investment in these incredible resources, we're going to lose what they give back to (the public). It may not be selling them, it's not equally as bad, but it's bad. It's what I'm most concerned about right now."

In a prepared statement this month after President Trump released his 2026 budget proposal to Congress, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins, whose department oversees the Forest Service, spoke of the need for the department and federal government in general to cut spending.

"We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to save our country from fiscal ruin. President Trump's budget will put us on the path to reducing our deficit and lowering the national debt. We have to act now.

"Lower federal spending combined with the largest tax cuts in the history of our country, strong deregulatory actions, and tariff & trade realignment will set the stage for the next generation of American greatness. At USDA we have already started by eliminating wasteful spending, reprioritizing our services to put farmers first, and cutting red tape."

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Dennis Webb

Dennis received bachelor's degrees in communication and political science with a TAG degree in Spanish from The University of Akron in Ohio. He grew up in Ohio with two sisters and two brothers, one being his fraternal twin. He and his wife have two dogs: Bacio, and Cal. Dennis currently covers natural resource and environmental issues for The Daily Sentinel

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