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First name: William

Last name: Baehr

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comment: Oversight of Partner Organizations and the Risk of Exploiting Volunteers for Funding

The Forest Service must exercise greater scrutiny and oversight over its partner organizations, especially those receiving public funds to support volunteer programs. In particular, the relationship between the Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF) and Friends of the Bridger-Teton (FBT) raises serious concerns. While FBT has secured substantial funding from the Jackson Hole Travel and Tourism Board on the basis of its ambassador program, there is insufficient transparency or accountability regarding how those funds are actually used and how volunteers are treated.

As a long-serving Camping Ambassador, I witnessed firsthand how little support, training, or financial clarity was provided to those on the ground doing critical visitor engagement and public education. When I raised questions about per diem policies and financial transparency, I was met with vague responses, a referral to FBT, and ultimately had to file a FOIA request just to attempt to understand the program I was part of. This is unacceptable.

There is a growing public perception-one voiced during tourism board meetings and in local media-that FBT may be leveraging the unpaid or under-supported labor of volunteers to solicit large grants while offering minimal benefit to the actual ambassadors. The Forest Service has a duty to ensure that partner nonprofits do not exploit the goodwill and dedication of volunteers for their own fundraising purposes without delivering clear, measurable, and fair support in return.

Recommendation:

The Forest Service must publicly disclose the terms and expectations of its partnerships with groups like FBT. It should also audit how volunteer-contributed data and labor are used, reported, and valued by its nonprofit partners. Ambassadors should never be used as pawns in grant applications or public relations efforts without meaningful compensation, support, or representation.

This level of transparency and oversight is essential not just for the fair treatment of volunteers, but for the integrity of the Forest Service's partnerships and its stewardship of public trust.