



March 10, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington DC, DC 20250-0002

Dear Secretary Rollins,

The Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) is writing to express its concern with the impact that recent staff layoffs have had upon the U.S. Forest Service's and the Natural Resources Conservation Service's ability to protect the archaeological resources under its care.

Formed in 1967, the Society for Historical Archaeology is the largest scholarly group concerned with the archaeology of the modern world (A.D. 1400-present). The main focus of the Society is the era since the beginning of European exploration. SHA promotes scholarly research and the dissemination of knowledge concerning historical archaeology. The Society is specifically concerned with the identification, excavation, interpretation, and conservation of sites and materials on land and underwater.

The USFS' National Heritage Program carries out identification and preservation of cultural resources that are part of the 193 million acres that make up the nation's National Forest System. The Heritage Program's activities ensure that present and future generations of Americans can see, understand and appreciate the physical embodiments of the cultures of the peoples who have inhabited the landscapes of our national forests and grasslands over thousands of years. USFS and other archaeologists work to avoid and minimize harm to cultural resources which reduces any conflict between the federal government, local communities and the public, which in turn expedites project delivery. The role of the archaeologist is to ensure that federal projects proceed while balancing the protection of our nation's heritage. They are a crucial component to the work of the USDA.

In order to accomplish this mission, which Congress delegated to the USFS and other Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies through the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, and other statutes, it is imperative that the USDA employ sufficient numbers of qualified staff persons, including archaeologists. Without adequate personnel levels, USFS and NRDC will be unable to efficiently identify and mitigate damage to significant cultural resources impacted by federal undertakings, as required by the

NHPA; manage such resources for public enjoyment and education; and protect them from vandalism, theft, wildfires, and myriad other threats to the fabric of our shared cultural past. A shortage of staff will also prevent USDA from carrying out meaningful consultation with federally recognized tribes to preserve their sacred sites and sustain traditional tribal cultural practices on forest land.

As late as 2023 the USDA employed more than 450 archaeologists, with nearly 400 in the USFS. At that time, Forest Service archaeologists were already hard-pressed to carry out their responsibilities, given the sheer amount of land to cover and the multifaceted nature of the workload. Though specific numbers are uncertain, it is our understanding that more than 40 such archaeologists were dismissed from the Forest Service in recent days, and at least 12 from the NRCS. A sizable reduction in the number of available archaeologists will make a difficult situation even worse and will inevitably result in major delays to needed projects such as timber sales (which generate income and business) and fuel reductions (which reduce wildfire threat and make fires more manageable). **Reducing archaeologists delays project delivery and creates government inefficiency.** It will also result in irreversible damage to the national heritage that is treasured by citizens of all political persuasions.

We understand and appreciate the need to ensure that government actions are carried out efficiently, and that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely. Nevertheless, the serious fiscal situation the nation finds itself in today is not the result of overspending on staff archaeologists, or inefficiency in carrying out their congressionally mandated duties. We strongly urge you to reconsider these personnel decisions and fill these newly open positions as quickly as possible. To do otherwise is to ensure greater inefficiency and uncertainty, higher costs, and the degradation of our irreplaceable cultural heritage.

Sincerely,

Rich Veit

Richard Veit, Ph.D., RPA

President, Society for Historical Archaeology