Outdoor Classrooms In Transition

Navigating the Risks of a Changing Federal Landscape

Paul Sanford - The Wilderness Society
Steve Smith - Experiential Consulting

Photo credit - Benj Wadsworth

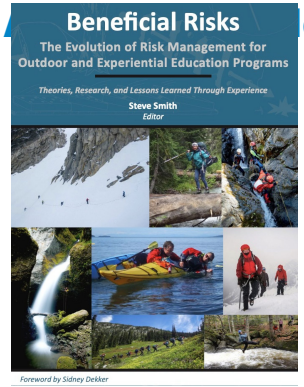
Background of Presenters

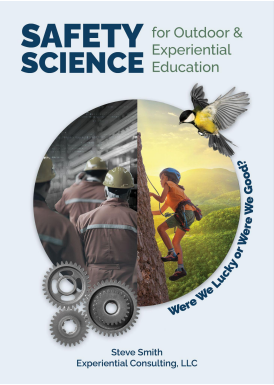
Paul Sanford

- Director of Equitable Access Policy - The Wilderness Society (2011)
- Attorney and Federal Policy Advocate since 1991
- Director of TWS recreation policy program since 2011.
- The Wilderness Society is a national policy advocacy organization that focuses on the protection and management of federal public lands in the United States.

Steve Smith

- Founder of Experiential Consulting / Risk Management for O/EE Programs
- WRMC Steering Committee (2011-16)
- A[illegible]ca





Overview - 90 Mins

I. **Welcome and Introductions** — 5 minutes
II. **Historic Assumptions** – 5 minutes
III. **Recent and Upcoming Changes in Federal Agencies and Federal Policy** — 30 minutes
IV. **Application of Risk Management Models** — 35 minutes
V. **Discussion** — 20 minutes



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Imagine an organization planning its field season

Assumptions it makes during its planning process:

✅ Public lands are maintained as they have historically been (access roads, campsites, bathrooms, parking areas)

✅ Agency staff are available to provide support as usual (answer questions, approve permit changes, help solve problems)

✅ Emergency response / search-and-rescue resources are is operating and available as usual

✅ Alternate routes are maintained as usual in case of emergency or itinerary changes

✅ Water sources will remain clean and uncontaminated, forests healthy, slopes stable, snowpack normal, air quality good, etc.

✅ Previously used data-driven forecasting tools and reports are adequate and effective (e.g., avalanche assessment, water levels, snowpack, weather, etc.)

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Imagine an organization planning its field season

Topics *it doesn't even consider* during its planning:

✅ Interactions with other people or the general public in rural or remote areas

✅ Threats posed to staff or participants from federal agents or when operating near or crossing national borders

✅ Visual or auditory impacts of industrial operations like mining or logging, or new threats posed by those operations such as logging trucks, fire risk, or unexpected road closures

✅ What else???

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The Changing Federal Landscape

- **What has changed since January 2025:**
  - Staff size at the Federal land management agencies.
  - Agency structure and programmatic priorities.
  - Policies that agencies use to manage Federal lands and waters.
- **The effect on your programs may be direct or indirect.**
  - Where you go.
  - Which risks you manage for.
  - What you do to manage risk.



Colin Arisman

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The Federal Land Management Agencies Are Changing

The agencies that manage public lands are being radically transformed.

- **Staff reductions**
- **Reorganizations**
- **Reassignment of major functions**



Agency Staff Reductions

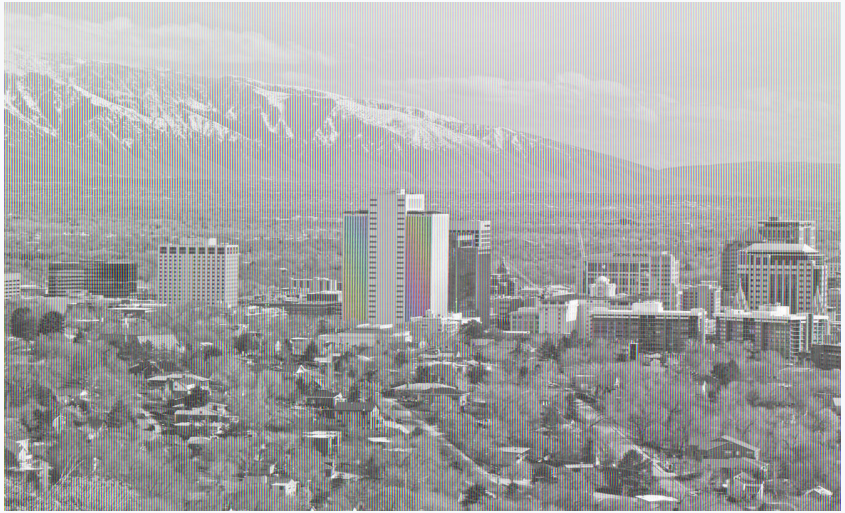
Land management agency staff reductions since January 2025:

- **USFS - 16% staff reduction in 2025 including significant firefighting staff.**
- **NPS - 24% of permanent staff lost in 2025; Seasonal hiring well below goals.**
- **USFWS - 36% staff loss since 2024 despite significant expansions of hunting and fishing access.**
- **BLM projection - 9512 positions in 2025 will be reduced to 5704 positions in 2027, a 40% staff loss.**

Structural Changes

Other agency actions have magnified the staff loss. Future changes will make it worse.

- **DOI centralized agency administrative functions in the DOI Secretary's office.**
  - Loss of staff reduced administrative capacity.
- **USDA wants to relocate USFS HQ to SLC.**
  - Relocation will likely drive more staff out of the agency.
- **Administration wants to consolidate fire management in the DOI Wildland Fire Service.**
  - If successful, will significantly reduce USFS staff available for managing recreation.



Alan Cresslers / USGS

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Effects of Agency Staff Reductions

Agency staff reductions will have widespread impacts in agency operations.

- **Shorter visitor center hours.**
- **Fewer staff devoted to natural resource protection.**
- **Less maintenance of recreation infrastructure.**
- **Reduced fire prevention work.**
- **Fewer permit administrators.**
- **Fewer public safety and emergency response resources.**



Bill Hodge/Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards

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Impact Snapshot - USFS Trails Status Report

- **Impacts reported in December 2025**
  - Some districts lost 100% of trail staff.
  - Hundreds of years of trail expertise lost.
  - Widespread burnout, declining morale.
  - Millions in partner grant funds unspent → Partner and volunteer-driven trail programs not available.
- **Results**
  - Trail system is “buckling.”
  - Trail miles maintained fell by 22%.
  - Unpassable trails, unsafe bridges.
  - Trails are being abandoned, especially in the backcountry.



Bill Hodge/Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards

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Federal Land Management Policies Are Changing

Since January 2025, many new management policies have been implemented or proposed for public lands:

- **Roadless Area Conservation**
- **Motorized Recreation Access**
- **Conservation on BLM lands**
- **Oil and Gas Leasing**
- **Wilderness Management**
- **Fire Management**
- **Data Centers**
- **Stewardship Contracting**
- **Public Lands Sell-off**
- **Immigration Policy**



Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress

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Roadless Area Conservation

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule is being repealed.

- **Rule protects 45 million acres of unroaded National Forest System lands.**
- **Repeal of the rule would have significant impacts.**
  - Increased road building, logging, mining, drilling and other extractive activities.
  - Reduction in quiet backcountry recreation opportunities.



Mason Cummings/TWS

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Travel Management and Motorized Recreation

Proposed policy changes would significantly expand motorized recreation on USFS and BLM lands.

- **Roads and trails previously closed to motorized use would be opened.**
- **Rules requiring the agency to minimize the adverse impacts of motorized use would be repealed.**
- **Results:**
  - More speed conflicts.
  - More noise.
  - More damage to land, water and wildlife.



Mason Cummings/TWS

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BLM Public Lands Rule

The Bureau of Land Management's Public Lands Rule has been repealed.

- **Rule put conservation on an equal footing with industrial and extraction activities.**
- **Repeal of rule returns to an development -weighted management framework.**
  - 245 million acres will tilt towards oil-and-gas leasing, mining, grazing, development and industrial activity.
  - Look for roads, heavy trucks, well pads and other industrial equipment in areas historically managed for conservation and recreation.



Mason Cummings/TWS

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USFS and BLM Oil and Gas Leasing Rules

Trump Administration is revising the 2024 oil and gas leasing rules to increase drilling in pursuit of energy dominance.

- **More oil/gas exploration on public lands.**
- **Less protection for high value habitat, recreation areas and cultural resources.**
- **Severely limited opportunities for the public to provide input and participate in decisionmaking.**
- **More abandoned wells.**
- **More taxpayer-funded restoration work.**



Bob Wick/BLM

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Wilderness Review

The Administration is reviewing how it manages designated Wilderness and other Wilderness-quality lands.

- **Review could weaken protections for quiet, un-roaded terrain where outdoor programming often takes place.**
- **Lands could lose protection over time through plan revisions, re-inventories, elimination of Wilderness Study Areas, and motorized use changes.**



Mason Cummings/TWS

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Fire Management

Several administration policies on fire may increase long term fire risks.

- **Repeal of the Roadless Rule.**
  - Fire starts 4x more likely near roads than in unroaded areas.
- **Return of the 10am rule and an emphasis on suppression over removal of the vegetation that fuels fires.**
  - Past focus on suppression resulted in accumulation of fire-prone vegetation.
  - Accumulation leads to more frequent and severe fires in the long run.



Mason Cummings/TWS

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Data Centers On Public Lands

Administration considering data center-related proposals covering at least 17,600 acres of public lands across six western states.

- **Data centers have a very large footprint and use large amounts of energy and water.**
- **“Behind the meter” power generation releases lots of exhaust and noise.**
- **Ancillary infrastructure (transmission lines, pipelines) can be visible for miles.**



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Stewardship Contracting

New contracting policies and procedures have disrupted the public lands stewardship contracting process.

- **Contracts for trail maintenance, facilities repairs, and recreation infrastructure development have been scrutinized, delayed or canceled outright.**
- **Review has directly impacted the ability of conservation corps and friends groups to fulfill their missions and assist the agencies with maintaining public lands.**



Bill Hodge/Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards

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Public Lands Sell-Off

The Administration and Members of Congress have proposed sales of public lands.

- **2025 proposals generated a powerful public backlash.**
- **More proposals are coming from both the Administration and Congress.**
- **Once public lands are sold they are gone.**
- **Public Lands can also be lost in other ways.**
  - Land exchanges with private interests.
  - Permitting of industrial or commercial activity that closes lands to the public.



Mason Cummings/TWS

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Immigration Policy

Aggressive immigration enforcement poses risks for outdoor programs.

- **Enforcement can impact a variety of programs.**
  - International operations.
  - Operations near the southern border.
  - Programs with staff or clients from immigrant communities (regardless of program location).
- **Risk can manifest itself in multiple ways.**
  - Real dangers of LE encounters.
  - Anxiety about potential LE encounters that impact staff and program participants.



U.S. Customs and Border Protection

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Collective Impacts of Agency & Policy Changes

Taken together, these agency/policy changes will have an impact on outdoor programming.

- **More roads and industrial activity in the backcountry.**
- **More motorized vehicles and user conflict.**
- **More deterioration in recreation trails and facilities.**
- **Greater risk of fires that burn hotter over larger areas.**
- **Less support from agencies for stewardship, permit administration, visitor services and emergency response/search-and-rescue.**



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Overview of next section

- **Incident Causation - examining our underlying assumptions**

- **Using Systems Thinking to visualize and understand the dynamic forces at work**

- **Guiding questions to explore these concepts and apply them to your organization**



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Comparing different incident causation models

“All models are wrong…

Some are useful.”

- George Box

Incident Causation Models

Theoretical frameworks used to understand how an incident happens.

There are simple models and more complex models.

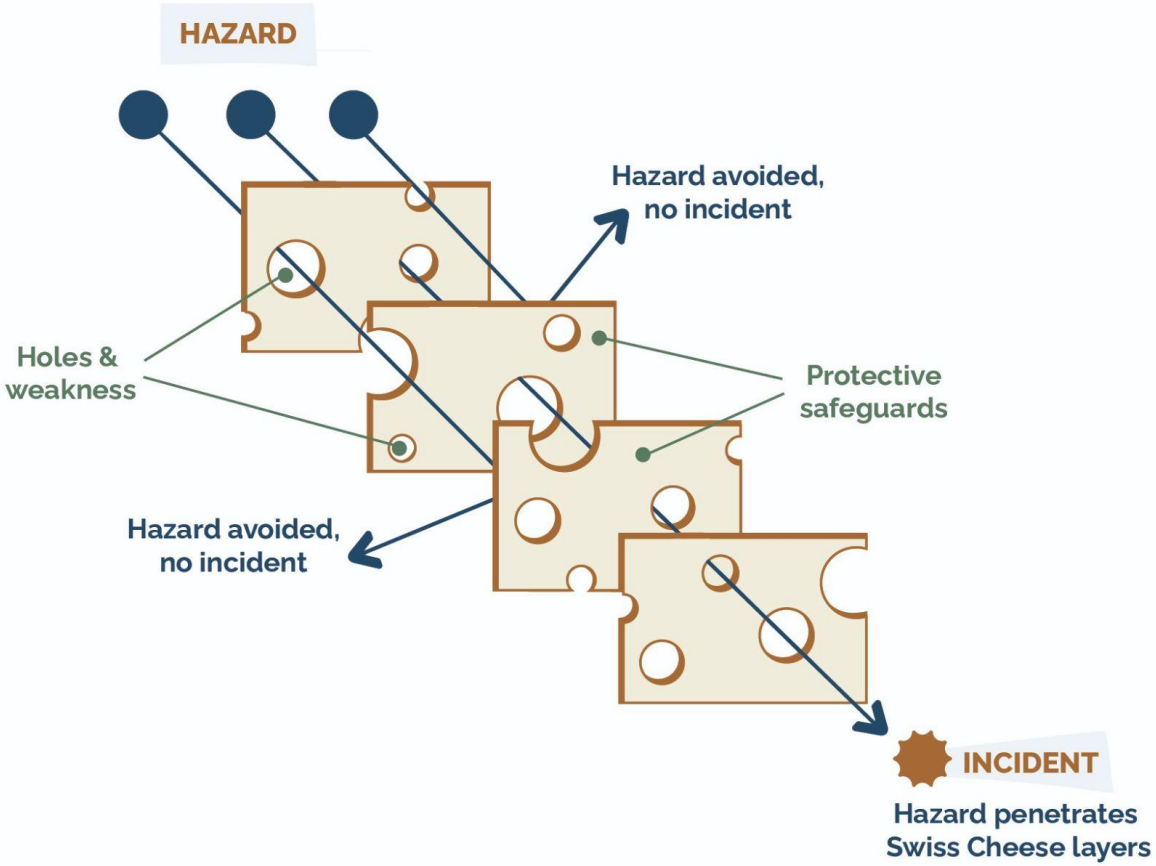
The model we apply affects what we can learn.

Heinrich's Domino Model

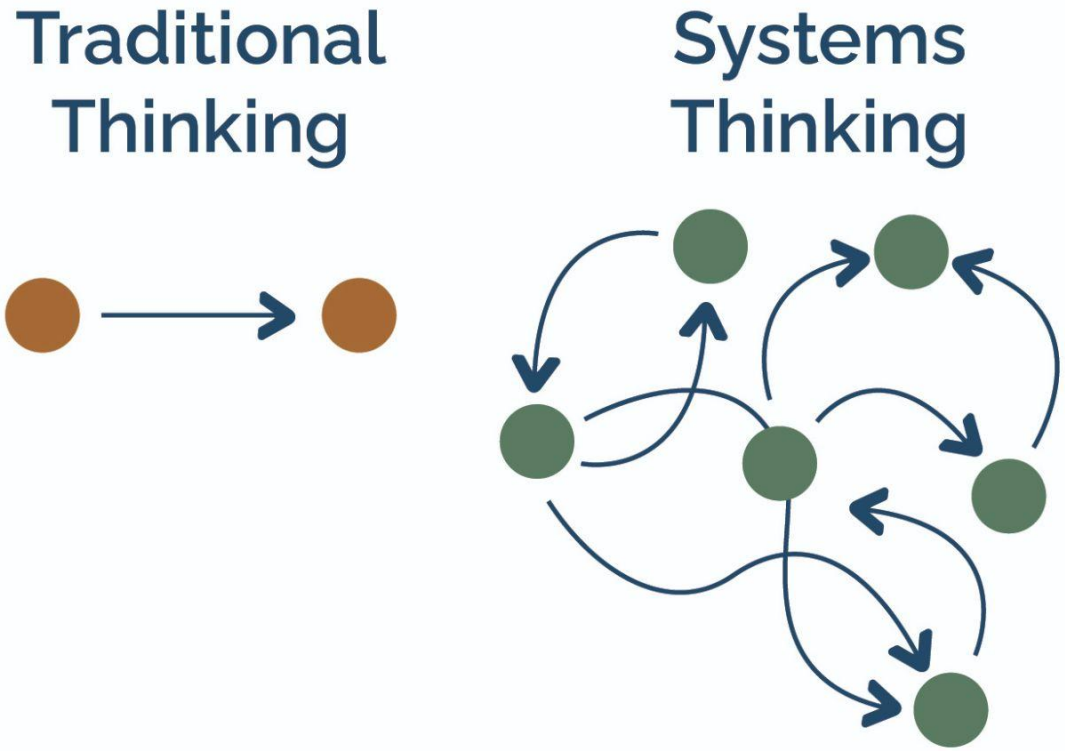


The injury is caused by the action of the preceding factors.

Swiss Cheese Model



Systems Thinking



A way of understanding outcomes as products of interactions among people, technology, tasks, organizations, goals, and environments over time.

It shifts analysis from isolated causes toward relationships, feedback loops, constraints, trade-offs, and system interactions.

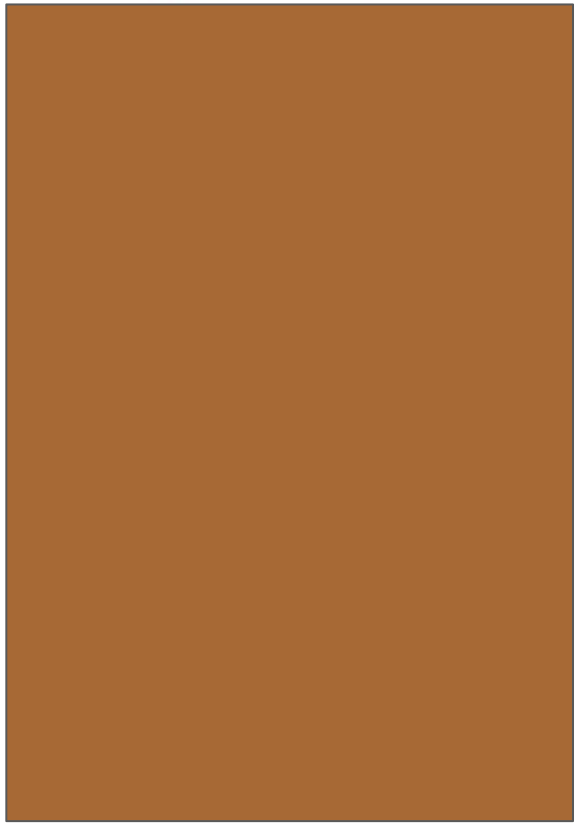
The Sea Otter Story

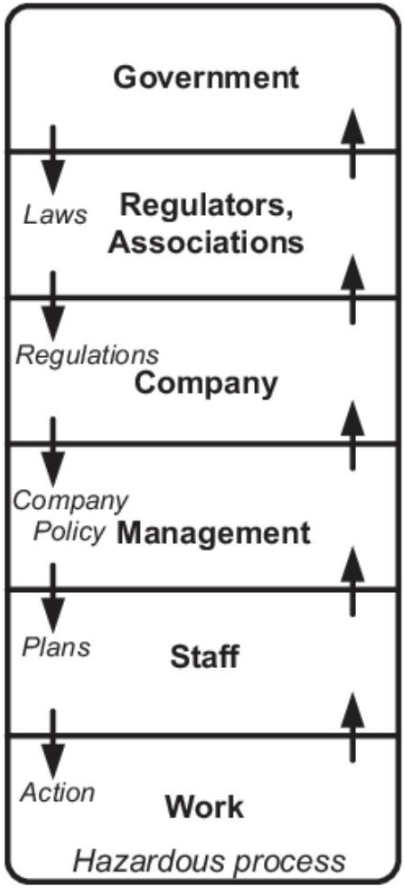
Linear View

FISHERMAN

SEA OTTER

SALMON

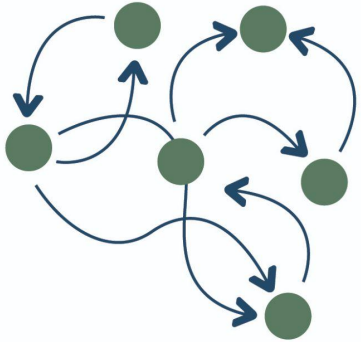




Rasmussen's AcciMap

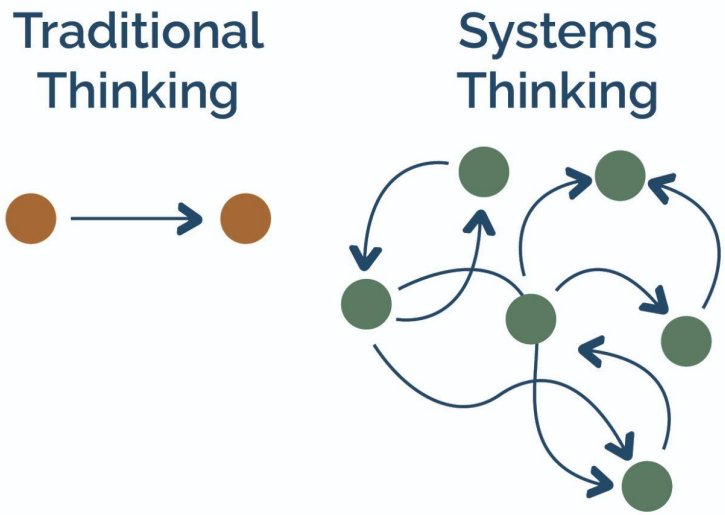
Traditional Thinking	Systems Thinking
Simple	Complex
Single (“root”) causes	Emergent causes
Knowing	Learning
Fixing broken components	Understanding Everyday Work



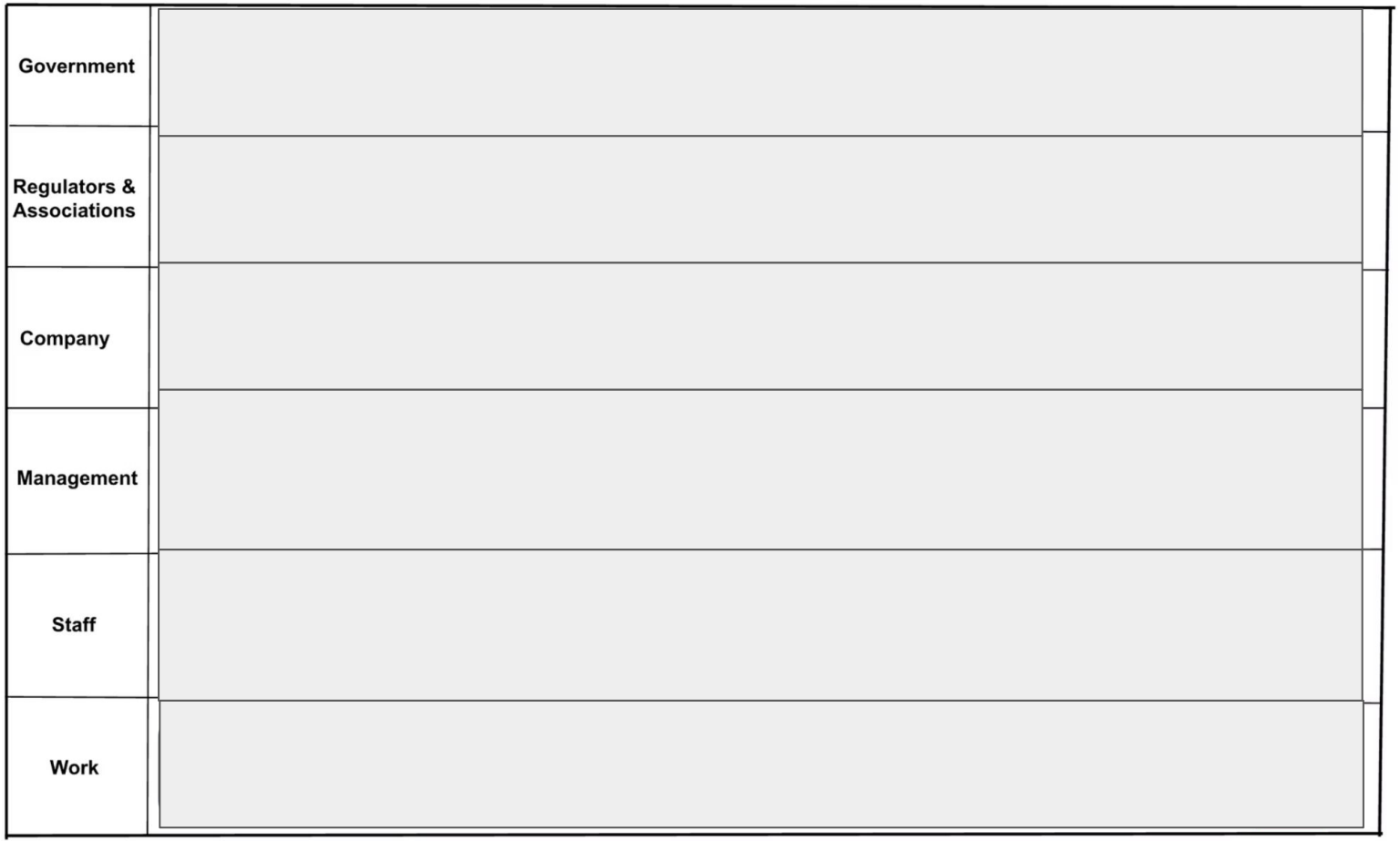


Outdoor Education: A youth backpacking program is abruptly asked to shift from their normal, known course area to a new area due to the threat of wildfire, with no fire crews available to offer any assessment or support. As a result of this shift, instructors find themselves in new terrain with a new itinerary that does not support their goals for their students. What was meant to be an appropriately challenging, student-led expedition becomes a struggle just to get from one campsite to the next, with instructors overwhelmed and students asking to leave the program early, which adds even more stress to the overtaxed program administrators.

Contrasting Linear Thinking and Systems Thinking…



Rasmussen’s AcciMap Model - Systems Thinking!



Climbing Guide Service: A climbing guide service relies on current, accurate avalanche and weather forecasting to plan and support their guides and clients in the field. They also design their trip offerings and daily pay rates for guides on the assumption that roads are open and trails are reasonably maintained. Due to federal layoffs, many of these services are compromised or missing altogether, creating a compounding series of challenges for guides and clients in the field. Due to the lack of backcountry rangers or any government oversight, normal campsites are unmaintained or completely overrun by unpermitted users, creating conflicts and confusion in the backcountry. Additionally, bathrooms that are usually maintained are overwhelmed, creating ecological/health issues for all users.

Taking the federal changes we outlined, draw an AcciMap that indicates the current impact on YOUR organization or programming

1) Place items on proper levels (government, regulatory, organizational)
2) Draw connecting lines

Special Recreation Permitting (a little good news)

The EXPLORE Act Title III seeks to improve the permitting process for using federal lands.

- **Improved permit application processing.**
- **Expanded permit types that should create new opportunities, particularly for small scale operators.**
- **More permissive policy for the use of liability release forms.**

But agency implementation of the EXPLORE Act has been uneven.

- **BLM has issued interim handbook and updated its RAPTOR system.**
- **USFS issued and then withdrew directives implementing Title III.**



Bob Wick/BLM

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Action Steps

- **Identify specific on-the-ground impacts resulting from the implementation of these new policies that will need to be monitored and assessed on an ongoing basis.**
- **Teach your staff to apply systems-thinking risk management models to your own workplace and to the programs you offer.**
- **Discuss the importance of advocacy for your organization at a local, state and national level.**



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Questions and Discussion

Paul Sanford
Director of Equitable Access Policy
The Wilderness Society
psanford@tws.org

Steve Smith
Founder
Experiential Consulting
steve@outdoorrisk.com