

About Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation

Jurisdiction: Nearly four million acres of designated wilderness, including the Selway-Bitterroot, Frank Church (the largest contiguous wilderness in the lower 48), and Gospel Hump Wilderness areas.

Operations: Maintaining 300-500 miles of Wilderness trails via professional trail crews, volunteer trail crews, and youth expeditions, as well as assisting the Forest Service with various tasks such as cabin hosting and river patrols.

Operational Focus: Wilderness stewardship, non-motorized remote trail clearing, youth engagement, and preserving institutional knowledge.

The Challenge

Operating in extremely remote regions without cell service, SBFC crews historically relied on paper maps and compasses, which often led to navigational "guesstimations". Without precise location data, crews struggled to estimate distances to camps or water sources, resulting in vague trail reporting (e.g., "a slide a couple miles down the trail"). Furthermore, high federal and seasonal staff turnover frequently resulted in the loss of critical institutional knowledge regarding safe campsites and trail hazards.

The Solution

By adopting onX, SBFC transitioned to a precise digital mapping workflow. Crews now use the app's distance tracker for accurate offline measurements and drop precise waypoints for tool caches, water sources, and trail obstacles. The "historic wildfires" layer helps crews confidently identify safe camping locations in burned areas. To combat staff turnover, SBFC is utilizing the new "onX for Business" service to centralize and preserve their mapped data within the organization.



Stewarding Millions of Acres in the River of No Return

The Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Foundation (SBFC) is tasked with a monumental mission: providing pathways for everyone to discover and steward nearly four million acres of wildlands. This footprint includes the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the largest contiguous wilderness area in the lower 48 states. Operating out of Missoula, SBFC deploys volunteer crews, youth expeditions, and professional trail teams on multi-day hitches to maintain 300 to 500 miles of rugged trail annually. For years, these crews navigated these vast, off-grid areas using paper maps and compasses, a method that heavily relied on memory and frequently resulted in navigational "guesstimations". When reporting trail hazards back to the Forest Service, descriptions were often vague, making future project planning incredibly difficult.

To eliminate this guesswork, SBFC integrated onX into their backcountry operations. Before heading out on an eight-day hitch, leadership now uses onX to prepare project information forms loaded with specific waypoints for known camps, water sources, and work start points. While in the field, crews utilize the app offline to accurately track their distance to camp and drop exact waypoints for trail obstacles like immovable boulders or slides. Additionally, the "historic wildfires" layer has become essential for assessing burn scars and ensuring crews establish safe campsites away from dangerous snags.

The precision of onX has enabled SBFC to tackle massive, complex projects. On the notoriously difficult Marble Creek Trail, crews used the app to precisely map 40 separate creek crossings over a 25-mile stretch. This exact data confirmed reports from thru-hikers and was critical in bringing the heavily overgrown trail back to life and keeping future travelers on the correct path.

While the exact hours saved are hard to quantify, leadership emphasizes that the removal of doubt in their reported data is invaluable. When asked what advice he would give other conservation organizations considering the switch from paper maps to onX, Wilderness Program Director Josh Page simply stated, "Do it yesterday," noting that for stewarding millions of acres of wild country, onX has become their "compass".