

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

March 27, 2019

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Chair, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Joe Manchin
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
306 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Hearing to Examine Opportunities to Improve Access, Infrastructure, and Permitting for Outdoor Recreation

Dear Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Manchin:

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

On behalf of the outdoor recreation community, thank you for your attention to protecting and improving outdoor recreation opportunities on our country's public lands and waters. Additionally, please accept our heartfelt thanks and congratulations for the committee's work in passing the recently signed public lands package. The pursuits enjoyed by our community and membership—from peaks to oceans—are entirely dependent upon the conservation and protection of the landscapes in which our activities occur, and conservation is the bedrock upon which outdoor recreation and the outdoor recreation economy rests.

Conservation, however, while absolutely essential to protecting and providing outdoor recreation opportunities, is only one part of the equation regarding public



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lands management, and we are appreciative of the committee's consideration of policy changes to support outdoor recreation, rural economic development, and the outdoor recreation economy. With careful adjustments to land management practices around issues from land management planning to special use permitting to infrastructure maintenance and improvement, Congress can help to ensure that conservation successes support economic opportunity and quality of life benefits and give all Americans more meaningful and accessible opportunities to connect with their public lands and waters.

Each year, outdoor recreation supports 7.6 million direct jobs, \$887 billion in consumer spending, \$65.3 billion in federal tax revenue, and \$59.2 billion in state and local tax revenue.¹ While these numbers are almost incomprehensibly large, they are in many ways just the tip of the iceberg with regard to the role of outdoor recreation opportunities in fostering rural economic development. Protected public lands, outdoor recreation infrastructure, and recreation opportunities play a substantial role in building economically vibrant communities by attracting employers and high-skill workers in industries well beyond those traditionally considered a part of the outdoor recreation economy. A study of employers in the Phoenix-Tucson area, for example, found that 7.6 percent of the overall "worker attraction" attraction value of the area was due to outdoor recreation opportunities.² In a study of the outdoor recreation economy in the area surrounding the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina, 95 percent of respondents indicated that they chose to live in Western North Carolina because of access to outdoor recreation.³

Congress has a substantial role to play in helping communities across the country derive maximum benefit from outdoor recreation and conservation wins. We believe that attention to the areas outlined below will help support public lands communities and make recreation opportunities available to all Americans.

¹ <https://outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/>

² THE SONORAN INSTITUTE, THE CAPITALIZATION OF OUR CLIMATE (2013).

³ Outdoor Alliance, The Economic Influence of Human Powered Recreation in Western North Carolina (2017), *available at*

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54aabb14e4b01142027654ee/t/5bb7ac4d104c7ba0aad3b24c/1538763858288/Attachment+2+->

+Economic+Impact+Study+of+Human+Powered+Recreation+in+NPNF+copy.pdf.



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As the committee considers ways to improve outdoor recreation opportunities, we strongly encourage outreach to a diversity of voices, particularly communities of color, LGBTQ communities, and people in a diversity of geographic settings, from urban to rural. Congress must work to proactively include communities historically excluded from outdoor recreation opportunities and conversations around the future of the public lands system in the U.S., and that outreach, in turn, will lead to more durable and equitable solutions that work in the interest of all Americans.

Precise Management

Recreation opportunities and associated economic development is best supported through precise management of public lands and waters. Over the past decades, our country has developed a system of protective public lands to take pride in. Although we can and must continue to improve, our country has done, and continues to do, an outstanding job of protecting landscapes for their intrinsic and ecological values, particularly marquee landscapes like those contained in our National Parks System.

Although this system serves outdoor recreation exceptionally well in some respects, treating recreation merely as a secondary benefit of conservation can leave some key landscapes—particularly close-to-home, frontcountry areas—without appropriate management or protection. It can also prevent communities from realizing the full potential for economic development that can come from leveraging outdoor recreation opportunities.

Data

Managing public lands for outdoor recreation opportunities and attendant economic benefits—as well as protecting conservation and other resource values—begins with developing sound data, including where people go, why people go there, the values that attract people to favored locations, and the economic effects of use patterns.

Good data, including patterns of visitor use, is necessary for crafting smart and equitable public land policy, but this data is often limited. On-site visitor monitoring efforts, such as the National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics program and the



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Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Program, provide important information about recreation on public lands. However, the expanse of public lands and the cost of implementing such programs limits the spatial and temporal coverage possible from on-site monitoring efforts. The result is often an incomplete picture of how many people recreate on public lands, when and where they go, and what they do. Land management prescriptions based on suboptimal data can result in misallocated resources, access restrictions, and resource damage. One way to address this problem, especially regarding outdoor recreation, could be through crowdsourced data.

Crowdsourced data may provide substantial and cost-effective information at unprecedented spatial and temporal resolution that could be used to better understand outdoor recreation activities and support recreation access, infrastructure, facilities, and economic insights. Use of this data—and its validation—is becoming more common. For example, researchers at the University of Washington and the U.S. Forest Service have used crowdsourced data in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest to better understand recreational use.⁴ Congress should consider ways to support these efforts.

Planning

Data development often occurs in the context of land management planning, and improved data collection and sharing has the potential to improve the efficacy of planning efforts, not just from the standpoint of outdoor recreation, but also through its potential to minimize disputes and lead to more durable land management decisions.

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the Forest Service’s 2012 Planning Rule, and believe its successful implementation is yielding improved decisions for outdoor recreation and public lands communities. Travel management is a similarly important process that helps to reduce user conflict and ensure that a diversity of recreation experiences are available on public lands and snowscapes. Our community was disappointed by the decision of Congress to stop implementation

⁴ Fisher, D. M., Wood, S. A., White, E. M., Blahna, D. J., Lange, S., Weinberg, A., ... & Lia, E. (2018). Recreational use in dispersed public lands measured using social media data and on-site counts. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 222, 465-474.



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of the Bureau of Land Management’s “Planning 2.0” initiative, and believe that the committee should look for ways to facilitate the implementation of, at minimum, some portions of BLM’s important modernizations—particularly those related to incorporation of non-agency data and information into the planning process. Similarly, BLM’s Master Leasing Plan program, ended by this administration, was proving to be an effective model for landscape-scale planning to help minimize areas of conflict and protect key recreational resources.

All successful planning efforts begin with gathering data, including information about outdoor recreation, and we strongly support steps to enhance these efforts. In our experience, the success of the Wilderness Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act stems, in part, from the requirement that land management agencies inventory for places that meet Wilderness or Wild and Scenic criteria, and we believe this successful model could be replicated to ensure that land managers inventory for landscapes of importance for outdoor recreation during planning processes, empowering Congress to pursue flexible protective designations appropriate for recreation-priority landscapes.

Managing for recreation

Managing public lands and waters appropriately to support sustainable recreation requires some targeted changes to existing processes and policies. In general, we strongly support encouraging land managers to make recreation a priority and engage in creative problem solving through the use of recreation-focused performance metrics for the evaluation of land managers, including based around the quality of the visitor experience.

Additionally, we believe there are specific areas where land managers need encouragement to address longstanding administrative obstacles to sustainable recreation.

Specifically, we support:

- Direction to ensure that rock climbing is treated as an appropriate use of Wilderness, including through the use of fixed anchors as appropriate.



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- Direction to ensure that access restrictions are based on sound science and public process; carefully tailored (spatially and temporally) to meet the needs requiring restrictions; and reviewed periodically.
- Direction to ensure mountain bike access on Forest Service lands is not closed arbitrarily without consideration of less-restrictive steps to address resource protection or user conflict needs.

Infrastructure and Access

Supporting outdoor recreation—and community economic development through outdoor recreation opportunities—depends on recreation infrastructure. Recreation infrastructure includes healthy, ecologically sound, protected public lands, but also more discrete resources like trail systems, trailheads and restroom facilities, and river access points. Congress should explore opportunities to invest in these essential resources, potentially through new, recreation-focused funding mechanisms.

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the decision of Congress in the most recent Farm Bill to recognize the connection between recreation infrastructure and rural economic develop by clarifying the appropriateness of using Rural Development resources for recreation projects. We believe that the committee should continue to explore additional ways to support rural development and recreation opportunities in tandem, particularly given the strong and well documented link between them.

Investing in recreation access infrastructure also should begin with ensuring full, dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The outdoor recreation community greatly appreciates the committee's efforts leading to permanent reauthorization of this successful program, and we believe ensuring the program's full funding is an essential next step in seeing the program's promise fulfilled.

In addition to specific infrastructure investments, access to outdoor recreation for some members of the public is enhanced by—or dependent upon—the ability of educators, outfitters and guides, and others to provide facilitated access through special use permits. Educational or other guided programs are often the first exposure many people may have to the outdoors, and the ability of competent



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entities to provide these services is essential to introducing new generations or underserved communities to the outdoors and to ensuring that interested individuals have an opportunity to develop skills, etiquette, a stewardship ethic, and a connection to public lands and waters in a safe and supportive environment. The challenges to efficient administration of the existing special use permitting system are well documented, and we strongly support the efforts of stakeholders in this system—including members of the public who do not use these services—to thoughtfully modernize this system.

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Thank you for the Committee's attention to improving recreation policy for our country's public lands, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to build on the success of the public lands package.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Policy Director
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Adam Cramer, Executive Director, Outdoor Alliance
Chris Winter, Executive Director, Access Fund
Wade Blackwood, Executive Director, American Canoe Association
Mark Singleton, Executive Director, American Whitewater
Dave Wiens, Executive Director, International Mountain Bicycling Association
David Page, Interim Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers
Phil Powers, Chief Executive Officer, American Alpine Club
Sarah Bradham, Acting Executive Director, the Mazamas
Keegan Young, Executive Director, Colorado Mountain Club
Chad Nelson, CEO, Surfrider Foundation

