



The Honorable Gina Raimondo
Secretary of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

June 24, 2021

Re: Prioritizing Outdoor Recreation Economy Development in Upcoming EDA Grants

Dear Secretary Raimondo,

We are writing today to thank you for your leadership in the ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) has been a crucial partner in distributing CARES Act funding to communities in need. We also write to support the EDA in their prioritization of community-centered economic development related to outdoor recreation in the upcoming disbursement of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

By using ARPA funding to support the travel and tourism economy and further economic development related to outdoor recreation in communities around the country, EDA has an unprecedented opportunity to promote long-term sustainable job creation, economic growth, environmental stewardship on lands and waters, and public health benefits and savings. Communities are hungry for this support: the "Recreational Economy for Rural Communities" program, a partnership through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS), and the Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC), recently provided new technical assistance to 10 communities—yet almost 170 applied. To ensure that investments reach and impact these communities, EDA ARPA funds should go well beyond marketing and DMOs, which encourage but alone do not enable sustainable outdoor travel, tourism, and recreation economies at the local level.

To accomplish this, several federal resource agencies and their foundations and partners are ready to work with EDA to meet EDA's funding objectives and investment priorities. These agencies, partner organizations and foundations have networks of businesses, gateway communities and nonprofit organizations whose existing programs and projects utilize local expertise to guarantee impactful investments. In partnership with these organizations, EDA can restore local economies and propel them forward by creating living wage jobs, building local economic capacity, jump-starting new businesses and industries, and improving infrastructure needs to access and foster sustainable outdoor recreation and its associated quality of life benefits.

Here are some recommendations for EDA to consider in supporting this unprecedented economic opportunity in outdoor recreation, travel and tourism:

- Partner with agencies, their foundations and recreation organizations to deliberately share project lists and needs across agencies that address economic needs in the outdoor recreation,



travel and tourism sector, and implement a mechanism to address these needs for the funding to be most impactful on the ground.

- Partner with other agencies to support grantmaking processes, with a particular focus on communities with Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American, and Asian-American and Pacific Islander residents.
- Develop interagency agreements on multi-beneficial existing programs such as the EPA/USFS RERC (Recreation Economies for Rural Communities) and other programs.
- Set up an agreement with federal agency foundations to administer a percentage of the funds while meeting EDA requirements and investment priorities.
- Collaborate on physical infrastructure needs—particularly in gateway communities—and provide access to recreation land and water resources while building local economic capacity and ensuring sustainability, quality of life and resilience to the impacts of climate change.
- Combine efforts or develop a multi-agency program to address equity and provide opportunity in the outdoor recreation workforce industry from infrastructure needs, trail and facility work, to providing training for outdoor industry supply manufacturing, business management and entrepreneurship opportunities. In this effort, target rural distressed and minority communities and work in partnership with Indigenous and tribal organizations, potentially developing regional/area outdoor recreation hubs.
- Develop partnerships in the recreation sector for skills training and job placement.
- Set up training across multiple agencies to ensure that staff are equipped to understand the combination of the outdoor recreation, travel, tourism and economic development sector.

Outdoor recreation is a major force in the American economy. Annually, it generates \$788 billion in output, comprises 2.1 percent of the United States GDP and supports 5.2 million jobs. Within diverse communities around the country, outdoor recreation on lands and waters plays a significant role in economic development, growth and resiliency, cultural vitality, and public health, particularly in rural America. Communities that invest in and prioritize outdoor recreation and conservation experience many benefits simultaneously, including:

- Entrepreneurship, recruitment, and retention in businesses across all sectors.
- Development of industry clusters revolving around aspects of recreation, visitor use and livability.
- Increased visitor services and associated businesses and expansion opportunities.
- Economic diversification and increased economic resilience to natural disasters and industry disruptions.
- Ecosystem services like clean air and water.
- Physical and mental health benefits that accompany time outside.

From an economic perspective, these are high-value investments. For example, in the Methow Valley, Washington, the extensive summer and winter trail system supports economic activity resulting in \$6 in salaries for local workers for every \$1 spent to develop and operate the trails. In Florida, a study found that the economic activity generated by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is



responsible for contributing \$4.4 billion and 43,000 jobs across the state, thanks to its world-class diving and fishing opportunities.

Despite these outstanding benefits that come from the development of an outdoor recreation economy, many outdoor recreation communities have been highly challenged during the pandemic. The combination of multiple forces created intense pressures on these communities: economic activity ground to a halt nationwide with major supply chain disruptions; international borders closed to international tourists, pushing Americans to travel domestically and less international visitors; many public land and water units were temporarily or permanently closed due to safety concerns and reduced staff; businesses were forced to restrict services or close their manufacturing facilities; and many gateway communities with limited hospital capacity and overwhelming medical demand asked non-residents to stay home. While some businesses could weather the storm, many small businesses and organizations, which are the lifeblood of the outdoor recreation economy, were forced to lay off staff or close entirely. In a survey of Outdoor Recreation Roundtable members in May, as many as 94 percent of outdoor businesses experienced drops in sales, and 88 percent of outdoor businesses laid off or furloughed staff. 11 percent of businesses closed or laid off all or most of their staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the close relationship between the natural and built environment as consumer behavior in leisure and local travel continues to reorient toward outdoor recreation activities. This moment provides a transformational opportunity for EDA to provide direct assistance to tribes, local or state agencies including offices of outdoor recreation, academic institutions, outdoor recreation and conservation nonprofit organizations, and other organizations that support the outdoor recreation economy and related commerce, industry clusters and development. In alignment with the Administration's priorities, EDA can create and support a workforce and economic development plan for communities that prioritizes sustainable tourism, workforce recruitment and retention, habitat restoration and climate resilience. These activities must be carried out in a transparent and sustainable manner—financially, environmentally, and socially.

We are very appreciative of EDA's willingness to consider our request for prioritization of outdoor recreation economies in upcoming recovery funding opportunities. Importantly, EDA has dozens of partners with expertise in this area who are creative and willing to expand their work to assist EDA in making the greatest impact to the outdoor recreation economy and the communities and who rely on it. Agency foundations and other organizations who understand local needs are ready to work closely with EDA to distribute funding and implement economic development projects directly into communities. Such investments will benefit businesses, nonprofits, tribes, and the greater public while creating countless jobs, revitalizing communities and organizations who have experienced some of the worst impacts of the pandemic. We look forward to the EDA's partnership in supporting the outdoor recreation industry, which guarantees economic, health and wellness, environmental and community benefits for all Americans through time spent outdoors.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

ORR OUTDOOR RECREATION ROUNDTABLE



Jessica Wahl Turner
Executive Director
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable

American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA)
American Conservation Experience
American Fly Fishing Trade Association
American Hiking Society
American Horse Council
American Motorcyclist Association
American Sportfishing Association
American Trails
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Archery Trade Association
BoatUS
CALREC Vision
Center for Responsible Travel
Conservation Legacy
Ducks Unlimited
Equine Land Conservation Resource
Greening Youth Foundation
Idaho Conservation Corps
Inland Ocean Coalition
International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association
Mammoth Lake Trails and Public Access Foundation (MLTPA)

Marine Retailers Association of America
National Forest Recreation Association
National Marine Manufacturers Association
National Marine Sanctuaries Foundation
National Parks and Conservation Association
Northwest Youth Corps
Outdoor Afro
Outdoor Industry Association
Professional TrailBuilders Association
Public Lands Alliance
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
REI
Rock Creek Conservancy
RV Industry Association
Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals
Sports and Fitness Industry Association
Student Conservation Association
The Conservation Alliance
The Conservation Fund
The Corps Network
The Trust for Public Land