



The Honorable Abigail Spanberger
Chair
Subcommittee on Conservation and
Forestry
House Agriculture Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Doug LaMalfa
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Conservation and
Forestry
House Agriculture Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Spanberger, Ranking Member LaMalfa, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR), thank you for bringing attention to the impact of this year's extreme wildfire activity on communities around the United States through last week's hearing on strategies to respond to and mitigate wildfire threats. As representatives for the \$788 billion outdoor recreation industry, we have watched closely as fires forced closures of cherished recreation areas and forced cutbacks in many of the businesses that sustain our industry. Because of outdoor recreation's notable economic, environmental, and public health benefits, we have vested interest in policies that help improve both management of and resilience towards wildfire risk on our public lands and waters.

ORR is the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations – made up of 34 national members, as well as other nonprofit organizations and business entities — serving more than 110,000 businesses. According to the most recent data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis released last year, the recreation industry generated \$788 billion in economic output, accounted for 2.1 percent of GDP and 5.2 million American jobs, and was growing faster than the economy as a whole in every indicator.

COVID-19 and the desire for safe, family-friendly activities during the pandemic made 2020 the biggest year for outdoor recreation participation and sales in American history. A survey published in May 2020 found that 81 percent of Americans had already spent time outside at that point in the pandemic, with 32.5 percent turning to outdoor recreation for the first time. 8.1 million more Americans hiked in 2020 vs. 2019 (a 16.3 percent increase), and the total percentage of Americans who participate in outdoor recreation rose from the previous ten years. Many sectors within the industry saw record participation numbers in the past year: freshwater fishing added 3.4 million participants in 2020, shipments of RVs reached an all-time high in the first quarter of 2021, new model powersports sales increased 40 percent in 2020 over 2019 levels, and retail unit sales of new powerboats in the U.S. increased by 12 percent in 2020 over 2019. These figures capture our nation's recognition over the past year that outdoor recreation provides significant physical health, mental health, and community benefits. Importantly, new participants in outdoor recreation are younger, predominantly female, and more diverse.

Despite this inspiring tailwind for outdoor recreation participation, this year's wildfires have severely impacted the outdoor recreation economy's ability to function at its fullest potential, particularly across Western states. To ensure safety for the public, land management agencies took unprecedented steps to close wide regions within national forests and parks, including the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in the Superior National Forest, Kings Canyon, Lassen Volcanic, and Sequoia National Parks, or all 18 of California's National Forests. Each of



these closures has a ripple effect, impacting the gateway communities and small businesses that benefit from these treasured public lands and waters. For example, Sierra Mountain Center, a 40-year-old guiding company based in Bishop, CA, was hit hard by USFS closures in both 2020 and 2021, putting guides out of works and disappointing guests who travelled from thousands of miles after being forced to close for three weeks in 2021 with just 36 hours' notice. And it is not only the communities and businesses that are impacted by wildfire, but the consumers they serve: Air Quality Index (AQI) readings across the West surpassed healthy levels for much of the summer as smoke impacted iconic outdoor recreation destinations, forcing cutbacks in recreational habits and visitation.

We share the concerns of the Committee about the unavoidable role of wildfire in communities around the United States and are prepared to work closely on strategies to reduce future wildfire risk and increase resilience to wildfires that occur. We are particularly focused on a few climate initiatives across the industry, including:

- Efficient implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act, which offers unprecedented levels of federal funding to create new and protect existing outdoor recreation infrastructure with benefits of both conservation and carbon sequestration
- Invest in climate resilient recreation infrastructure and natural ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change on outdoor recreation businesses and the communities that rely on them
- Expansion of EV charging networks across public lands and waters to reduce emissions from the transportation sector
- Creation of a Civilian Climate Corps, which would put America's youth and veterans to work on green infrastructure projects that can increase climate resilience and expand outdoor recreation access.

We hope the House Agriculture Committee in the 117th Congress will see us as a key partner in identifying more opportunities to address risks and opportunities posed by wildfire in the future.

Sincerely,

Jessica Turner
Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable