



January 19, 2022

The Honorable David Scott
Chair, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Glenn Thompson
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
1010 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Thompson,

On behalf of the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable and our 35 national association members, I would like to thank you for convening this important hearing on the State of the Rural Economy. Rural economies and the outdoor recreation economy are intertwined, and we look forward to working with the Committee to identify policies and opportunities to help further strengthen both. There is no greater opportunity for sustainable rural development than through embracing the outdoors and there is no better time for the expansion of outdoor recreation into the American fabric than now.

Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) is the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation entities representing more than 110,000 American outdoor businesses and the full spectrum of outdoor activities. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the recreation industry generated \$689 billion in economic output, accounted for 1.8 percent of GDP, and 4.3 million American jobs in 2020, despite industry slowdowns and access restrictions caused by COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, outdoor recreation was growing faster than the economy as a whole.

Rural economies across the country have been disproportionately impacted by large industry shifts, especially within the manufacturing and extractive sectors. Many communities dependent on these traditional industries and the employment opportunities they provided have already been impacted by boom and bust cycles, as well as the 2008 recession. Now, the COVID pandemic has put significant pressures on rural communities and the economies they rely upon.

Outdoor recreation is an antidote to these problems in many communities. This sustainable and growing sector provides real benefits to communities, from the economic boosts of a revitalized main street, new entrepreneurship and increased visitation to existing businesses, to public health benefits, strengthened communities, and recruitment and retention of businesses and workforce. Additionally, outdoor recreation creates new jobs in manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, finance, insurance, advertising, professional and technical services, and supports existing businesses with new clientele and increased economic activity.

We greatly appreciate the work that Congress has done in recent years to increase funding for programs in rural communities that strengthen recreation infrastructure and expand access to grow local economies. The Great American Outdoors Act, the bipartisan Infrastructure Bill and the American Rescue Plan unlock funding for outdoor recreation projects that will create jobs in gateway communities and strengthen rural communities through people connecting to safer and healthier outdoor assets

The development of outdoor recreation economies needs to be part of the solution for rural America as we all look to a broader strategy to achieve economic diversification and resilience while maintaining cultural heritage and landscape character. Rural communities can flourish by prioritizing natural and built assets within or adjacent to a community that enables outdoor recreation and its associated economic, social, health, and environmental benefits. As more people turn to outdoor recreation, alignment with rural communities will help bring more spending, more jobs, and more growth.

I would also like to briefly discuss what ORR has been doing to help facilitate the industry's growth within rural America.

- We have created the [ORR Rural Economic Development Toolkit](#), which is a compendium of best practices, case studies, and challenges related to economic development through outdoor recreation. This toolkit was created from interviews with over 60 practitioners across the country and was developed in partnership with the Oregon State University Center for the Outdoor Recreation Economy and the National Governors Association. The response we have seen has been overwhelmingly positive.
- ORR is also stepping up to help rural communities reinvigorate their local economies and create resilient communities through outdoor recreation thanks in large part to support from The VF Foundation. The Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) assistance program, launched in 2019, is underway and ORR is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the Northern Border Regional Commission to support implementation grants for communities who have undergone technical assistance. These grants will help make the economic revitalization plans of communities come to life. For instance, the community of John Day, Oregon developed a plan to enhance its outdoor recreation economy amidst the backdrop of the pandemic, and received \$5,000 in seed funding from ORR in partnership with the VF Foundation to implement its plan. The small grant from ORR, in combination with technical assistance from RERC, helped unlock millions of dollars in state grants to support long-needed outdoor recreation infrastructure for John Day.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans rediscovered their love for the outdoors. More people turned to outdoor recreation activities like hiking, biking, fishing, camping, climbing, and boating than ever before. People found solutions in the outdoors for their physical and mental health, as well as opportunities to connect safely with family and friends. The past two years have introduced millions of people to outdoor recreation opportunities both close to home and across the country. This trend reflects a long-term shift in the priorities of our society, not a short-term trend expected to reverse itself.

The outdoor recreation industry looks forward to continuing to partner with the Department of Agriculture and the Committee to help build local outdoor recreation economies. We look forward to working with the Committee and the federal agencies to ensure that the appropriate policies are in place to sustain long-term growth in rural communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Jessica Turner', written in a light gray color.

Jessica Turner
President