

Background

ORR has been working since early transition meetings in the Biden Administration to build upon the work of past administrations and establish a long-standing, cross-agency coordinating body working on recreation. In meetings with cabinet officials and agency leadership, correspondence with Congress, and other public comment opportunities, ORR has highlighted the Federal Interagency Council on Recreation (FICOR) as a uniquely impactful body to help meet the moment and manage the convergent trends of record-breaking recreation interest and increased visitation, climate impacts on public lands and waters, decaying infrastructure, equitable access, new technologies, and more.

For context, under President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors Initiative, each land or water management agency lead (Secretary or Director) was appointed to FICOR where they worked together to address interrelated challenges on America’s public lands and waters. Key outdoor recreation opportunities were seized, including creation of Every Kid Outdoors and the Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account. This group disbanded in 2017 with the change in administration but the Trump Administration embraced the concept by creating their Recreation Advisory Council. This was a group of private sector interests connected to agency work and managed by the Department of the Interior. In 2021, this group again disbanded with the change in administration.

As one agency lead noted in a recent meeting to discuss agency coordination around outdoor recreation priorities, “People assume that these agencies already have a built-in structure to collaborate and that they do so frequently. They don’t.” Because of this coordination gap, ORR identified the revitalization of FICOR as a top priority under the Biden Administration and is pleased to see the announcement of a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in July 2022 to establish this working coalition of agency partners.



Why now, and opportunities for the new FICOR

Recreation management has become more important than ever for the agencies and American public. At the same time, it is more fractured than ever at the federal level. Due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, public lands and waters are seeing their highest-ever user demand for recreation and its associated benefits, while climate-related pressures like fire, flooding, drought, and more continue to stress recreation infrastructure. Despite this, there is no coordinated, cross-agency body to solve these and other issues facing the sustainability and health of our great outdoors and the people, jobs, communities, and economies who rely on these places.

Formalizing and institutionalizing this coordinated inter-agency body of leaders from agencies—with support and engagement from the director level and national recreation leaders who interface with the recreation economy—will help make progress towards common goals, such as:

- ensuring sustainable and equitable access to all our cherished outdoor places.
- growing jobs and the recreation economy.
- supporting more healthy and livable communities in every region of the country.
- mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change.
- advancing new technologies.
- building infrastructure to meet record-breaking recreation demand.
- conserving and protecting our natural resources, habitat, and wildlife.

Outdoor recreation has never factored so prominently into Americans’ values and quality of life as it does today. FICOR will help agencies coordinate their efforts to eliminate redundancies, implement infrastructure and Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funding effectively, efficiently allocate taxpayer dollars, quickly activate policy changes, and provide high-quality experiences on public lands and waters now and in the future. ORR will work to ensure that this coalition is maintained through future administrations so that its efforts gain momentum and efficacy over time.

As ORR noted in its 2019 transition paper and subsequent meetings, an ideal outcome would be initial investment and creation of FICOR at the White House and then codification by bipartisan bill (or appropriations) in Congress (based on the REC Act). Currently, both pathways are on track for success with the newly announced MOU by the Biden Administration creating FICOR. For FICOR to live up to its potential, it will require funding and full-time staff. Legislation in the 117th Congress (America’s Outdoor Recreation Act, already passed by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee) would ensure FICOR institutionalization within the agencies and with future administrations. This legislation still needs to be passed in the House.

Key topics FICOR could address, identified by ORR

Visitation

- Overcrowding and the disbursement of users throughout public land and water units in a fair and equitable way
- Better, more uniform data on location and type of recreation with a real time public interface
- Reforming the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) to ensure that fees collected on public lands and waters are utilized effectively

Funding

- Coordinating rollout of infrastructure and GAOA project funding
- Developing sustainable funding structures for outdoor recreation given changing revenue and costs over time

- Quantifying economic impact of outdoor recreation (e.g. through the Bureau of Economic Analysis)

DEI/Equitable Access

- Accessibility
- Understanding of equity impacts of reservations and fee increases
- Every Kid in a Park
- Developing information, education, reservation systems and interpretation to meet the needs of diverse constituents

Economic Development

- Supporting local communities and their businesses in the wake of COVID-19
- Developing and providing rural development toolkits and technical assistance

- Promoting outdoor recreation on public lands and waters as an outlet for improved public health
- Ensuring gateway community engagement in decision-making

Recreation User/ Infrastructure Management

- Managing and mitigating the impacts of climate change across public lands and waters
- Coordination of permitting
- Creating new systems to promote alternative and active transportation
- Preparing for emerging technologies and electric vehicle charging needs across public lands and waters
- Implementation of Congressional actions (e.g. recreation package)