



November 29, 2023

Testimony of Jessica Wahl Turner, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable  
Legislative Hearing on EXPLORE ACT

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the committee,

On behalf of the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the EXPLORE Act – historic legislation that will increase access to and equity in the outdoors, strengthen the outdoor recreation economy, and provide better opportunities for everyone to enjoy, benefit from, and protect our shared public lands and waters.

ORR is the nation’s leading coalition of outdoor recreation associations collectively representing more than 110,000 outdoor businesses and the full spectrum of outdoor-related activities. Most of these businesses are small businesses that are key aspects of rural towns and large cities across the country.

Data released earlier this month by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis shows that outdoor recreation generated \$1.1 trillion in gross output and 5 million American jobs in 2022, comprising 2.2% of the nation’s economy and 3.2% of all U.S. employees. The data also shows that from 2021-2022 outdoor recreation grew 2.5 times faster than the U.S. economy and that our job growth doubled that of the national economy as we continued to see more people flocking to the outdoors and valuing how important time outside is to our mental, physical, and societal health.

The EXPLORE Act is a transformative piece of legislation that is the culmination of years of hard work by Members of Congress and their staffs – including many on this committee – as well as non-government partners from across the outdoor recreation industry and conservation community. It is the first-ever recreation package that combines many bipartisan and bicameral bills into a single piece of legislation, lifting all boats in the recreation economy’s rising tide.

This landmark package is truly comprehensive; it contains many bills that have existed for years, including the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act, Recreation Not Red Tape Act, and Outdoors for All Act, as well as newer concepts like the Biking on Long-Distance Trails Act, Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act, Federal Interior Land Media Act, and more. If passed, EXPLORE would create more transparency and certainty for businesses operating on or near public lands and better experiences for nearly 165 million Americans who benefit from outdoor recreation activities each year.

With the increased visitation and participation numbers our industry has seen since the beginning of the pandemic, there are many opportunities before us but also growing challenges to consider. How do we accommodate more visitors while ensuring quality outdoor recreation experiences and the continued health of our shared natural treasures? How do we support businesses impacted by canceled trips or closures from fires, smoke, droughts, and other natural disasters? How do we make sure communities have the assistance they need to support sustainable recreation? How can we advance equitable access to front and backcountry experiences? How do we modernize infrastructure to better serve visitors' changing needs to access and enjoy public lands and waters? How do we coordinate across all the agencies implementing policies related to outdoor recreation?

Recreation champions worked across the aisle to develop components of this package that address these issues and more, ensuring the federal government has the necessary tools to manage recreation for our businesses, visitors, Tribes, states, and the communities who rely on recreation assets. Whether it is a manufacturer in Arkansas, a guide and outfitter in Arizona, or a family-owned diner outside a popular national park, businesses in our industry are like others in that they need certainty to continue to make investments in their employees and serve their customers. The EXPLORE Act provides this much-needed certainty through good government collaboration at the highest levels and on-the-ground tools to connect main street businesses with the benefits of recreation.

The outdoor recreation community has been working with Congress to advance these policies for years. Now is the time to update management policies and plans for 21st century recreation demands and provide opportunities for Americans in every corner of the U.S. to benefit from time spent outside. This bipartisan and bicameral bill does not cost taxpayers any additional money. On the contrary, it will actually bring in new dollars for land and water management agencies as it includes updates to antiquated policies and puts more tools in the toolbox to manage lands with better data. This will have an enormous impact on preserving natural resources and recreation opportunities for future generations while supporting more dollars for recreation management.

Long-standing components like the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act (SOAR) will help streamline the permitting process on public lands to provide significant improvements for guides and outfitters, nonprofits, and education institutions that have been burdened by a permitting process that too often does not authorize new permits. These businesses are often small and local and have limited staff and bandwidth. Despite these constraints, they spend months navigating complicated permit processes without any certainty they will receive agency approval to run the trips that will keep them in business next year. This extreme uncertainty



places undue stress on business owners and employees whose livelihoods depend on their ability to obtain these permits. The EXPLORE Act would change that for the better.

The Recreation Not Red Tape Act adds onto SOAR's benefits with important provisions like establishing online payment processing for certain federal passes and fees, enabling Americans to plan their visits from the comfort of home. It also engages the private sector in volunteer opportunities to efficiently address stewardship, which eliminates unnecessary duplication of efforts through interagency coordination, encourages land managers to account for outdoor recreation in planning efforts, and enhances outdoor recreation opportunities in shoulder seasons, among other necessary proposals.

New provisions like the Improving Outdoor Recreation Coordination Act – which would codify the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) – will help break down government silos so we can see a better return on investment for taxpayer dollars and come up with the best policies for our industries' biggest opportunities and challenges. This coordinating body among the federal agencies that manage recreational access to our public lands and waters helps to build a collaborative culture by which they can share innovative ideas, approach challenges that cut across various jurisdictions, and work together to make long term and beneficial impacts. This is much like what ORR does for our members every day – bringing together industry leaders to work on issues that improve and grow the entire recreation community, whether you are a hunter, climber, RVer, hiker, boater, or biker. As outdoor recreation continues to grow in importance for policy priorities – from rural economic development, conservation, and transportation to health and equity – this level of coordination is critical because it ensures that agencies are aligned internally and provides a single point of contact externally for outdoor recreation stakeholders – including our members and the industry.

Additionally, the Gateway Communities and Recreation Enhancement Act will help communities plan for recreation in ways that support key areas like housing, over-crowding, and workforce development. Post-pandemic, more people are choosing to live where businesses know they can recruit and retain employees. Much of this growth is happening in and around rural gateway communities. Attention to the authentic and sustainable development of recreation economies in places near parks, forests, and Bureau of Land Management lands is critical to supporting not only conservation of those natural resources that are often the driving forces behind this growth, but also the small to mid-sized businesses who are the backbone of these communities.

Strong, healthy, and sustainable public lands and waters breed strong, healthy, and sustainable small businesses and local communities. Our special outdoor places need continued support from Congress and the administration to keep the outdoors accessible and enjoyable for all



Americans, and to help this important sector of the economy thrive and grow. There is no bigger legislative priority for the entire outdoor recreation industry than passing the EXPLORE Act. We hope this transformative bill will pass and be signed into law this year and we look forward to working with you and your Senate counterparts to ensure that happens.

As Congress has many areas of disagreement between the two parties, it is also important to note how the EXPLORE Act is bringing both sides of the political aisle together around shared priorities. This legislation is a beacon of bipartisan cooperation and consensus building that highlights the power of policymakers working together, developing innovative solutions, and partnering with a diverse group of stakeholders. Everyone wins when this collaboration occurs, and our industry is able to do what we do best: create healthy communities, jobs, people, and economies.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the outdoors and for advancing this important bill. The legislation discussed here today is a win for Republicans and Democrats, American businesses, and the American people – not just today’s recreationists but also future generations of outdoor lovers who we hope will gain the same benefits we do from time spent in nature. The time is now to get this done and the entire industry stands with you. Thank you again.

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