

Joint Testimony

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In Support of H.R. 1065, the Outdoors for All Act

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

The Honorable Bruce Westerman , Chair

The Honorable Raúl Grijalva , Ranking Member

November 2, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today on behalf of our bill, the *Outdoors for All Act*. We introduced this legislation, joined by more than 60 bipartisan cosponsors, because we care about getting more of our constituents—and your constituents—outdoors, and bringing more parks, trails, green space, and recreational opportunity to places where the need is most acute.

We appreciate the strong commitment Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members on both sides of this Committee’s dais have shown to expanding public access to recreation. Our legislation does exactly that by codifying an important National Park Service conservation grant program – the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Program, or ORLP – with provisions that will make it more useful and available to many more communities in each of the 50 states and US territories.

Research shows not only that our nation’s economically disadvantaged communities lack access to parks and outdoor experiences, but also that the parks they do have are smaller, lower quality, and less well-equipped to meet recreation needs than parks in better-resourced areas. Not surprisingly, this imbalance of opportunity is painfully evident in America’s big cities and in minority communities, but it is also a problem in smaller communities currently ineligible for the benefits ORLP can provide.

That competitive grants program, established through the 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act and funded by Congress in each successive fiscal year, has ever since operated under administrative guidance, developed and implemented by the National Park Service. Under that administrative rulebook, it has provided real, tangible help to cities, communities, neighborhoods, and families across America. The ORLP program has focused on addressing park access inequities in more densely populated areas that historically did not benefit from other existing federal support for conservation and recreation infrastructure that is central both to our shared American experience and to the critically important outdoor recreation economy. With our legislation, it can do even more.

The *Outdoors for All Act* extends ORLP’s reach beyond the communities currently eligible for the program, lowering or eliminating barriers to entry that have been identified through the real-world implementation of the program over the past decade. To address that goal, one crucial provision of our bill will lower the population threshold for eligible communities to 25,000 residents. Since the program’s establishment, metropolitan areas like those we proudly represent have qualified for grants under OLRP, but some communities, like those neighboring our districts in California and Ohio, have not. Our bill will bring the benefits of ORLP funding to a host of additional communities all across the country.

Other key provisions of the *Outdoors for All Act* will:

- for the first time allow federally recognized tribes, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians to apply directly for and receive funding, without additional eligibility hurdles;
- give the Interior Department much-needed flexibility regarding matching requirements, to ensure that communities without means are not unduly excluded from the program; and
- provide new congressional direction for implementation of ORLP, ensuring that the program addresses priority considerations including shrinking the park equity gap, responding to the increasing dangers of the heat island effect, and enhancing air and water quality.

Mr. Chairman, we all recognize the critical importance of green spaces to public health, economic vitality, and quality of life in our communities. The *Outdoors for All Act* appropriately reinforces our federal commitment to parks, in big cities and small ones, and to the underserved communities that lack access to the benefits of open space. That commitment is demonstrated by the broad bipartisan support that our bill has received here in the House and on the Senate side as well, where it was rightly included in the recreation package reported out of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee as America's Outdoor Recreation Act (AORA). We urge the Committee to take similar action, and we look forward to working with you. Thank you for your consideration.