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September 5, 2025

Hearing on *The Great American Outdoors Act: Modernizing and Maintaining National Parks to Celebrate America's 250th Birthday*

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources

Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee — thank you for the opportunity to testify.

This past weekend, my family spent three special days under the Tetons with friends on Leigh Lake. We used park restrooms, trails, boat ramps, and backcountry campsites. I'll never forget lying on the beach under Mt. Moran with my six-year-old, listening to a loon in the distance as she marveled at the Milky Way while tucked into her sleeping bag. That moment reminded me, America's greatness isn't measured just by skyscrapers, but by the landscapes that inspire awe and connect us to each other. Our national parks and public lands are the very soul of this country.

My name is Taylor Phillips. I'm the founder of EcoTour Adventures, a guiding company that helps visitors connect more deeply with the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem through wildlife viewing and natural history interpretation. I also founded WYldlife For Tomorrow, a program of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's nonprofit partner, The WYldlife Fund, which engages Wyoming's travel and tourism businesses in conservation. In addition, I serve on the boards of the Wyoming Office of Tourism and the Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Business Alliance. And as a father raising kids in northwest Wyoming, right beneath Yellowstone and Grand Teton, I know firsthand how our public lands connect generations.

When I started EcoTour Adventures in 2008, it was just me. Today we employ 40 people, with livable wages, full health benefits, and retirement. This year our payroll will approach \$2 million, directly reinvested in our local economy. We are one of more than 70 guiding companies in our region, and last year together we introduced over 81,000 visitors to Grand Teton National Park. This story is repeated across the country, where small businesses thrive because of our national parks and public lands.

None of this is possible without the National Park Service and the broader network of public lands. In Grand Teton, I see every day how committed the NPS is to protecting resources, partnering with the local community, and providing the best possible visitor experience.

But our businesses also depend on basics — roads, trails, restrooms, and campgrounds. Without them, and without healthy wildlife and access to public lands, our livelihoods vanish.

We've faced this before. In the 1950s and '60s, Mission 66 modernized visitor centers, campgrounds, and roads, preparing the Park Service for a new generation. It was a bold investment that paid dividends for decades.

The Great American Outdoors Act is delivering a 21st-century Mission 66. GAOA has begun addressing decades of deferred maintenance, making parks safer and more welcoming. But much remains. Take Colter Bay in Grand Teton — one of the park’s busiest areas — where outdated infrastructure struggles to keep up with visitation. GAOA is essential to ensuring gateway communities like Jackson can sustain growth.

And GAOA’s benefits reach beyond northwest Wyoming — to our National Forests, BLM lands, and other federal lands from the Red Desert in the south to the Bighorns in the north. These dollars must be invested wisely — expanding access while protecting the very resources that make these places special.

This is more than conservation. It’s smart investment. Studies show every dollar invested in the National Park Service generates about \$10 in economic return through visitor spending, job creation, and local economic activity. That’s not a partisan talking point — it’s a measurable outcome that strengthens rural economies.

But this progress depends on continued leadership from Congress. Representative Hageman, thank you for being here today and for your engagement on these issues. Your support for reauthorizing the Great American Outdoors Act would send a strong bipartisan message that Wyoming values both its wildlife and its economic future.

In Wyoming, the return is clear: wildlife drives our economy. Travel and tourism is our second-largest industry after energy, and the largest private-sector employer. Visitors don’t come to see gas stations, they come for elk, bison, bears, wolves, and intact landscapes. Protecting wildlife is protecting the backbone of our economy.

That’s why we created WYldlife For Tomorrow. Already, more than 90 Wyoming businesses have invested directly in wildlife conservation, because they know their livelihoods depend on it. Those dollars often serve as matching funds to leverage larger investments.

This is where GAOA and the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program work hand in hand. GAOA keeps lands whole; the Crossings Program keeps them connected. Take Highway 26 near Dubois, a critical migration route for mule deer. Today, it’s a dangerous bottleneck. A crossing there would save lives, human and animal, while sustaining the wildlife that drives Wyoming’s economy.

The pilot program is working, but the need will not end in five years. That’s why I urge you to make it a permanent program, alongside reauthorizing and expanding GAOA. Together, these bipartisan solutions protect wildlife, strengthen rural economies, and deliver returns for decades to come.

I’ll close with a reminder. Yesterday, September 4th, was National Wildlife Day — a day to reflect on what we’ve inherited, and what we will pass on. John D. Rockefeller Jr., who was instrumental in the creation of Grand Teton and Acadia, said it best:

“I know of no expenditure of money in my life that I could look back upon with such satisfaction as the money I have given to these parks.”

Wildlife and public lands aren’t just part of our heritage, they are part of our future. By investing in GAOA and a permanent Wildlife Crossings program, Congress can ensure

that my children — and all American children — inherit a Wyoming, and an America, where wildlife still roams free and people still care.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to the Great American Outdoors.