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In support of the Great American Outdoors Act 250.

Good morning Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to be with you today.

My name is Katherine Andrews, and I serve as the Director of Arkansas' Office of Outdoor Recreation within the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. It is an honor to appear before this committee in support of the Great American Outdoors Act, and particularly before Chairman Westerman, a fellow Arkansan and steadfast champion for our public lands, outdoor recreation opportunities, and The Natural State.

From the towering bluffs of the Buffalo National River to the rugged peaks of the Ouachita Mountains, from the cypress-lined waters of the Delta to the hills and streams of the Ozarks, Arkansas offers some of the most diverse outdoor recreation opportunities in America. We are home to the Mountain Biking Capital of the World, the Duck Hunting Capital of the World, and the Trout Capital of the United States. We have the start of the world's longest bayou, the highest waterfall between the Rockies and the Appalachians, and

the nation's first National River, the Buffalo National River. Arkansas is also the only state where you can hunt both elk and alligator.

These places are more than just destinations. They are part of who we are, our culture, our legacy.

These places are where families teach their children to fish, where lifelong memories are made around campfires, where visitors discover our state for the first time, and where Arkansans develop a lifelong appreciation for conservation and stewardship.

At the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism, our mission is to protect and promote our state's natural, cultural, and historical resources while supporting a thriving economy and enhancing quality of life for all Arkansans.

Outdoor recreation is one of Arkansas' greatest strengths.

It supports jobs, drives tourism, attracts businesses and workforce talent, improves public health, and creates opportunities for communities across our state. Visitors and residents alike are drawn to places where they can spend time outdoors, and those experiences create real economic impact.

In 2024 alone, visitors to Arkansas' National Park Service sites generated more than \$301 million in economic activity for local communities and that impact is felt right here in Hot Springs. Those visitors supported local restaurants, outfitters, lodging providers, retailers, guides, and countless small businesses that depend on strong outdoor recreation assets.

Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders has made outdoor recreation a priority for Arkansas and challenged us to think bigger about how

our natural assets can drive economic growth, improve quality of life, and strengthen communities across our state. Through the Natural State Initiative, she brought together state agencies, local communities, private partners, conservation organizations, and outdoor recreation stakeholders around a shared vision for Arkansas' future.

One of the central ideas behind that effort is simple: outdoor recreation is an industry, and like every industry, it depends on infrastructure.

We often think of infrastructure as highways, bridges, utilities, industrial sites, factories, and transportation networks. For the outdoor recreation industry, infrastructure looks different. It includes trails, campgrounds, boat launches, access points, visitor facilities, public lands, wildlife management areas, recreation corridors, roads into outdoor destinations, and the countless assets that connect people to the outdoors.

Without places to recreate, there is no outdoor recreation economy.

Outfitters cannot guide visitors to inaccessible destinations. Communities cannot attract visitors to facilities that are closed or deteriorating. Manufacturers cannot grow participation in outdoor activities if people lack places to experience those activities in the first place.

Recreation access and public lands are infrastructure for the outdoor recreation industry. They are the foundation upon which the outdoor economy is built.

Maintaining existing infrastructure will always be important. But access itself is infrastructure.

In Arkansas, we have seen firsthand that access drives participation. Participation drives economic activity. And economic activity supports jobs, businesses, and communities.

Through the Great American Outdoors Act, nearly \$37.6 million has been invested in projects across Arkansas, helping improve approximately 150 public land assets throughout the state. As of March 2025, these investments have supported projects at Hot Springs National Park, Buffalo National River, and the Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge.

At Hot Springs National Park, funding is helping rehabilitate historic bathhouses that have welcomed visitors for generations. These investments are preserving nationally significant structures while creating new opportunities for public use, visitor experiences, and economic activity in one of Arkansas' most iconic destinations.

At the Buffalo National River, funding is helping address infrastructure needs that support visitors and park operations, like enhanced campsites, new restrooms, and improved canoe launch ramps.

At the Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge, investments are improving boat launches, campgrounds, roads, bridges, and visitor access facilities while supporting one of the most important waterfowl habitats in North America.

These investments are not simply about repairing buildings or roads.

They are investments in family fishing trips. They are investments in duck hunters, hikers, paddlers, campers, birdwatchers, and outdoor enthusiasts. They are investments in gateway communities and rural economies. Most importantly, they are investments that ensure future generations can enjoy the same outdoor experiences that have shaped so many of us.

As Director of Arkansas' Office of Outdoor Recreation, I often say that our office serves two groups.

First, we serve our outdoor recreation industry partners—manufacturers, outfitters, guides, retailers, hospitality businesses, and entrepreneurs. We help them grow, create jobs, and overcome barriers to success.

Second, we serve our communities—towns, counties, parks, and nonprofit partners that are working to leverage outdoor recreation as a tool for economic development and quality of life. We help them understand the benefits of outdoor recreation and connect them with resources and funding to build the infrastructure necessary to support growth.

The Great American Outdoors Act supports both.

In Arkansas, we have set an ambitious goal of doubling our outdoor economy. Achieving that goal will require continued investment in the places that make outdoor recreation possible. We know that if we want more people hiking our trails, floating our rivers, hunting our public lands, camping in our parks, and supporting outdoor recreation businesses across our state, we must first ensure the infrastructure exists to support those experiences.

The Great American Outdoors Act helps make that possible. This year, as our nation celebrates America's 250th anniversary, we have an opportunity to reflect not only on our history, but on our responsibility.

More than a century ago, Theodore Roosevelt recognized that America's natural landscapes were among our nation's greatest assets. He understood that conservation was not simply about protecting special places. It was about ensuring that those who come after us would have the same opportunities to experience, enjoy, and benefit from them.

I often wonder what President Roosevelt would think if he could see the outdoor recreation economy today. He would see millions of Americans hiking trails, floating rivers, hunting, fishing, camping, climbing, and building businesses around the very landscapes he fought to conserve. He would see communities thriving because of their connection to the outdoors.

But I believe he would ask us one simple question: What are we doing today to ensure those opportunities exist for the next generation?

The Great American Outdoors Act helps answer that question. It is not simply an investment in deferred maintenance. It is an investment in stewardship.

On behalf of the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation and the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism, thank you for your commitment to America's public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering your questions.