

STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
REGARDING:

GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT 250

JUNE 12, 2026

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA).

On August 4, 2020, President Trump signed GAOA into law, enacting the most significant piece of public lands legislation in a generation. GAOA continues to provide new opportunities for the USDA Forest Service to deliver benefits to the American public through major investments in infrastructure, recreation facilities, public lands access, and land and water conservation.

The GAOA established the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) which provided funding to address deferred maintenance at the Forest Service, National Parks Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Education during fiscal years (FY) 2021-2025. In addition, GAOA authorized mandatory permanent full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which provides for federal land acquisition and Forest Legacy grants to states under existing programs. These investments in Forest Service infrastructure, recreation facilities, and public lands access demonstrate the agency's commitment to caring for the land and serving people.

Legacy Restoration Fund

The Forest Service manages a complex infrastructure portfolio to facilitate public access and forest management across 193 million acres in 43 states and two U.S. territories. The agency administers approximately 368,000 miles of roads, 6,700 road bridges, 164,000 miles of trails, 7,400 trail bridges, 1,500 dams and reservoirs, 1,100 communications sites, 30,000 recreation sites and 40,000 buildings. Infrastructure managed by the Forest Service – including roads, trails, firefighter housing, and more – is deteriorating faster than funding can maintain it.

LRF was authorized for up to \$1.9 billion annually, of which the Forest Service received 15 percent, or approximately \$285 million per year, between Fiscal Years 2021 and 2025. These funds have helped the agency to repair mission critical infrastructure that supports public access and forest management. To date, 1,247 deferred maintenance projects have been funded and 510 projects have been completed through LRF with a legislative mandate that allows up to 35% of funds to be used for roads and bridges, leaving 65% for facilities and other non-transportation infrastructure. LRF projects have been implemented across 43 states and territories and 128 National Forests, Grasslands, and Research Stations. These projects generate an estimated 3,200 jobs and \$360 million in Gross Domestic Product annually. Examples of successful projects include:

- *Recreational Improvements on the Ouachita National Forest, Arkansas*
The Ouachita National Forest received \$285,000 in FY 2021 GAOA funding for 10 small projects, all of which are complete. These include replacing bathhouse doors at Cedar Lake Recreation Area; replacing deck boards and repainting the Little Missouri Falls trail bridge; repairing a tornado-damaged CCC-era pavilion at Shady Lake Recreation Area; replacing roofs on numerous buildings; and replacing campsite furniture, signage, and kiosks across the forest. The Ouachita also received \$2 million in GAOA funding to rehabilitate a loop within Shady Lake Recreation Area, including re-designing the campground's layout, replacing all roadways and campsites, improving drainage, adding electric, water, and sewer connections, and repairing the exterior of a CCC-era bathhouse. Construction is complete and the site is open to the public.
- *Mount Valhalla Snowpark on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Wisconsin*
The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest received approximately \$10 million in GAOA funding for 21 projects. The Mount Valhalla Snowpark and nearby developed recreation sites exemplify how GAOA funds have reduced maintenance backlogs and improved services to local communities. Work at the Snowpark included repaving, resurfacing, replacing drainage structures, and improving traffic flow in and around this popular destination while addressing more than \$900,000 in deferred maintenance at this site.
- *Mizpah Campground Rehabilitation on the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests, Colorado*
The Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests received \$1 million for repairs to the Mizpah Campground, which is highly valued by the Clear Creek County community. Several years ago, a culvert on the access road washed out effectively closing access to the campground. GAOA dollars are replacing the lost culvert with a new aquatic organism passage, reconditioning the access route allowing the site to reopen, and restoring the campground by eliminating all deferred maintenance. The project is underway and planned for completion next year.
- *Tenmile Road Construction and Hume Lake Bridge Replacement Project on the Sequoia National Forest-Giant Sequoia National Monument, California*

With \$4 million of GAOA funds and an additional \$3.7 million in leveraged funding, the Sequoia National Forest-Giant Sequoia Monument were able to repair 10.7 miles of Hume Lake Road, rehabilitate the Powder Can Picnic Area parking lot, and replace the bridge at Long Meadow Creek. This maintenance enhances public access to the 17 giant sequoia groves in the district, residences and businesses at Hume Lake, and important emergency services.

- *Silver Lake Boardwalk on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forests, Utah*

The Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forests received more than \$3 million in GAOA funding to improve the Silver Lake Boardwalk, which is part of the Silver Lake Education & Recreation Complex located at the head of the Salt Lake City municipal watershed. The Visitor Center and associated trail network serve as a hub for interpretation and education, where weekend visitation regularly exceeds 10,000. The boardwalk helps to protect the headwaters of the watershed that provides water to Salt Lake City. Funding for the project was used to remove and replace more than 2,500 feet of aging boardwalk and fishing piers. Partner funds were used to rebuild and make more accessible the native soil path that completes the loop around the lake, and to rebuild the restroom near the parking lot.

While the Forest Service is proud of our work under GAOA, an estimated \$11.3 billion in deferred maintenance is still outstanding due to the size of our infrastructure portfolio, inflation, and increasing demands on infrastructure for recreation and active management activities. Forest Service roads and bridges represent more than \$7 billion of the agency's deferred maintenance in FY 2025; buildings account for more than \$2.9 billion. FY 2025 was the final year of funding for the LRF under the 2020 legislation.

Great American Outdoors Act 250 Analysis

The Great American Outdoors Act 250 would extend the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, redesignated as America's Legacy Restoration Fund, through 2030, to support activities that modernize and maintain infrastructure managed by the National Park Service, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Education, and Forest Service. The bill authorizes collection of up to \$1.9 billion per year from energy development revenues and increased public lands fees on international visitors; 15 percent of funding, or up to \$285 million per year, would be allocated to the Forest Service. Additional funding may be received from private donations. GAOA 250 implementation includes transparency measures, including establishment of a public database of projects, Congressional reporting, and a Government Accountability Office study.

GAOA 250 expands the scope of funded activities beyond what is supported through the original GAOA legislation. GAOA 250 projects could include work to reduce or eliminate deferred maintenance through one-time investments or cyclical maintenance; work to establish, repair,

restore, improve, construct, or reconstruct statutorily authorized assets; and recreation enhancement or improvement services, including wildlife habitat improvement to support sportsmen's access for hunting and fishing. For the Forest Service up to 45 percent of funds could be directed to transportation projects, including roads, bridges, tunnels, and parking areas, but not including road decommissioning; this is an increase from the 35 percent allowed for in the 2020 act. The Forest Service would be authorized to allocate up to 15 percent of funds to projects that improve recreational opportunities for sportsmen. The bill directs that partnership authorities and cooperative agreement mechanisms be used to help carry out GAOA 250 projects.

We would like to work with the committee on ways to expand the scope of authorized projects in GAOA 250 while considering the intent of the original GAOA legislation. The majority of the Forest Service's maintenance backlog is on the transportation network; well-maintained roads and bridges are essential for public access, active management, and wildfire response. The increase in the transportation spending cap from 35 percent in the original legislation to 45 percent in GAOA 250 will enhance flexibility and ensure that funding can be directed to the highest priority assets that improve public access and support forest management. We also look forward to working with the committee to understand and clarify the intent related to the 15 percent cap on outdoor recreation and sportsmen's access projects under the proposed pilot program.

The emphasis on public-private partnerships in both the original legislation and GAOA 250 aligns with the Forest Service's longstanding work with partners and volunteers to accomplish the agency's mission. Under the original legislation, the Forest Service was successful in leveraging external contributions to expand the reach of the fund, with approximately \$100 million in additional funding from partner organizations.

The Administration appreciates the committee's desire to offset a portion of the cost of the legislation. The Administration believes that identifying additional revenue streams to fund reauthorization will protect taxpayer dollars consistent with the President's priorities and that spending in the final legislation should be fully offset.

The Forest Service also recommends that the foreign visitor fees instituted by GAOA 250 apply only to entrance fees and not to standard amenity recreation fees. These fees are generally nominal, mostly less than \$5, as they are applied to sites like picnic areas that are typically visited en route to another destination. Enforcement would be extremely challenging for the agency given that more than 90 percent of standard amenity fee sites are not staffed.

Recreation infrastructure like campgrounds, picnic areas, and trailheads, and the transportation network that connects these sites, make possible approximately 160 million visits to National Forests and Grasslands each year. USDA supports the intent of GAOA 250 to modernize and maintain infrastructure across the National Forest System and defers to the Department of the

Interior for its views on impacts to lands under its jurisdiction. USDA supports reauthorization of the Great American Outdoors Act that is fully offset by additional revenues.

Closing

The FY 2027 President's Budget proposes to reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund to fulfill the Administration's commitment to restore America's lands and support local economies. Once reauthorized, Forest Service LRF projects will address priority deferred maintenance projects and meet the objectives of Executive Order (E.O.) 14313, *Establishing the President's Make America Beautiful Again Commission* and E.O. 14314, *Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks*.

Forest Service looks forward to working with Congress on this important legislation with the ultimate goal of improving outdoor recreation opportunities across the country, increasing visitor capacity, bringing sites into compliance with accessibility standards, and contributing to the Forest Service's commitment to making America beautiful again.