

National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee Hearing
10:00 AM, Wednesday, May 22, 2019
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Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Chairman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing and allowing me to highlight my bill, H.R. 1727, the *Complete America's Great Trails Act*.

Established in 1968 under the National Trails System Act, National Scenic Trails are trails of significant length (often thousands of miles) that pass through areas of particular natural beauty across the United States. From Yellowstone to the Everglades, these trails connect America's greatest places, crossing dozens of states and more than 100 Congressional Districts.

Unfortunately, of these 11 Congressionally-designated trails, only the Appalachian Trail is complete, while the Pacific Crest Trail, Continental Divide Trail, and Potomac Heritage Trail each have a number of missing links. Additionally, all National Scenic Trails are threatened by encroachment from development.

To close the gaps in these great trails and protect them from development, the *Complete America's Great Trails Act* will provide private property owners with voluntary tax incentives to dedicate public access and conservation easements along these scenic trail corridors. The value of this tax credit would be the "fair market value" of any National Scenic Trail conservation contribution.

When the Appalachian Trail was established by statute in 1968, it followed remote ridgelines from Maine to Georgia. Today, though the trail is complete, much of the land surrounding it is under tremendous development pressure. Residents of Atlanta, Raleigh-Durham, Richmond, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, and the Boston metropolitan areas are within a two-hour drive of the Appalachian Trail.

Two other National Scenic Trails, the Continental Divide Trail and Pacific Crest Trail traverse some of the wildest, most scenic country in America. From the Sierra Nevada to Glacier National Park, these trails cross terrain of unrivaled ruggedness and solitude. Yet they are missing numerous links, and in some places, like Southern California, face increasing development pressure. This bill will ensure that residents of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Las Vegas, Denver, Phoenix, and surrounding communities can enjoy these trails for generations to come. Moreover, it will provide rural landowners with a valuable new tool to protect their ranches and farms.

And just outside our nation's Capital, the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, which runs through my district, is designed to connect George Washington's birthplace at Pope's Creek with his plantation at Mount Vernon and with historic sites like Harper's Ferry. Yet this trail is also incomplete.

Other National Scenic Trails may be less well known but are no less spectacular, and include the Florida National Scenic Trail, Ice Age National Scenic Trail, and North Country National Scenic Trail, which traverse places as varied as Wisconsin's moraine and Florida's vast Everglades.

Completing our National Scenic Trails is not just an issue of conservation and recreation – it’s also an issue of good economics. According to the Land and Water Conservation Fund¹, outdoor recreation is responsible for 6.5 million jobs and contributes \$730 billion to the national economy². It also estimates that 50 to 70 million Americans visit trails each year. These visitors then pay for gas, food, and lodging in towns and cities close to the trails, providing a boost to local economies. By completing these trails, we can help communities across the nation reach their full economic potential.

As the former Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, I understand fully how beneficial trails can be to a community. Trails increase the value of nearby properties and make communities more attractive places to live. Trails provide transportation options and cut fuel expenses, offering reliable means of transportation for short distance trips. Finally, trails can even reduce medical costs by encouraging exercise and other healthy outdoor activities.

The *Complete America’s Great Trails Act* is endorsed by a variety of organizations, including the Trust for Public Lands and the American Hiking Society. I would ask that a complete list of supportive organizations, as well as their individual letters of endorsement, be submitted into the record of this hearing.

Congress has a responsibility to play a role in protecting all public lands for future generations, including these beautiful scenic trails. We have already done important bipartisan work in reauthorizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and we can do it again. The *Complete America’s Great Trails Act* offers both sides of the aisle another opportunity to promote conservation practices and protect our natural treasures for generations to come. I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this hearing, and I look forward to working with members of the Committee on these efforts.

¹ <https://americanhiking.org/resources/economic-benefits-of-trails/>

² <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2006-active-outdoor-recreation-economy-report/>