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Legislative Hearing
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
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Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse,

On behalf of REI Co-op, I would like to thank the committee for starting this important conversation on how to make our federal lands more accessible to members of the Armed Forces and this nation's veterans. I welcome the opportunity to provide the co-op's support for, and some comments on, the draft version of the Military and Veterans in Parks (MVP) Act.

At REI, we know that the outdoors brings people together – Republicans and Democrats, different generations, families, friends, and many others. Despite our many differences, we all love the outdoors and find common purpose in enjoying it together. As this legislation highlights, time outside, in nature, provides meaningful opportunities and solutions for many of us, not the least of which is our health and wellbeing. My team and I look forward to an ongoing dialogue with you and your staff on this important topic.

Statement of Interest

My name is Marc Berejka and I serve as the Divisional Vice President for Community Advocacy and Impact at the co-op. I am also President of the REI Cooperative Action Fund ("REI Fund"), a relatively new public charity created by the co-op to foster more equitable access to time outside.

REI is 85 years old this year. We were founded in the Pacific Northwest in 1938 by 23 climbers who were pioneering routes in and among the area's mountains. They had each other, as they mapped their way into the region's inspiring nature and its adventures. They found they needed quality gear at affordable prices. And since the region didn't have a provider, they created an entrepreneurial solution – a co-op for importing the best-available, European tools, selling them at a modest mark-up, and enabling them to be all they could be.

Fast forward to today and REI is in almost every state. We have over 180 stores, a robust online presence, and over 15,000 employees. We buy product from about 1,000 different small and medium-sized outdoor companies from around the country. And all told, the co-op now has over 23 million members, approaching nine percent (9%) of the country's adult population.

We are proud of our steady growth, our longstanding stewardship of our lands and waters, our commitments to sustainability and diversity, and our support for hundreds of nonprofits annually. To date, we have invested over \$125 million in our nonprofit partners across the

country. But we also know the mission suffers a gap. We and others call it the nature gap. For all the work we've done over the decades to introduce people to the outdoors – and its many benefits – we are fully aware that large swaths of the American public lack welcoming, accessible opportunities to connect with nature. In fact, based on available data, we believe that a full 100 million people in America face this nature gap.

To address it, just last week in Anacostia Park, we launched a new, long-term commitment and initiative we call "[Outside in 5.](#)" Its aim is to be more forthright in identifying access issues and more determined than ever in addressing them. The nature gap emerges in different ways among different communities, but at the core we see systems and policies that have led to exclusion and displacement from nature. Last week, we put down a marker that we will invest our treasure and time against this problem, and also use our advocacy voice, like we do here today.

We know that time outside is fundamental to human wellbeing. This is not a notion but an increasingly demonstrable fact. All of us know from our own experiences that time outside, in nature, is good for our wellbeing. But because of research we've sponsored, there's also an increasing body of evidence that shows how, physiologically, time outside benefits us.

REI's Commitment to the Purpose of this Bill

At REI, we have been steadily investing in research around the intersection of nature and healing and the importance of outdoor recreation to overall health and wellness for almost a decade.

We are especially grateful to have pursued some of this work in partnership with veterans and the veteran's community. In Congress, you know well how important it is for us to demonstrate the nation's respect and gratitude for our vets' service. One focus of ours has been to highlight the unique role time outside in nature – facilitated via cohort or alone -- can play in the rehabilitation and wellbeing of our vets. We commit ourselves to this work because America's veterans have literally dedicated their lives to safeguarding this country and its lands and waters.

It should go without saying, but all of us – government, industry, nonprofits, and others -- should do what we can to make it ever-easier for our military and former military to enjoy the places they've been protecting and to get the important benefits of being in nature. Personally, I have had the honor – on more than one occasion – to hear a suffering vet describe how his life "was saved by the mountains" or "by a fishing trip with guides and buddies" or "by a through-hike along the Appalachian Trail." The fact that well-crafted time outside can heal should not be up for debate, but it still does seem to be a fact we have to prove.

So as one company, with our partners, we endeavor. We have supported research at some of the country's top universities with vets as enthusiastic participants, as well as trauma-suffering youth. Several years ago, we helped stand-up a Nature and Health initiative at the [University of Washington](#); and, recently, the REI Fund has provided seed investments for a national [Nature and Health Alliance](#), as well as similar efforts at the Universities of [Utah](#) and of [Maryland](#). For all these institutions, time outside is seen as a vehicle for rejuvenation and healing trauma.

We know that demonstrating efficacy is one key step. Another lays in feasibility, especially for people with disabilities. Here, the REI Fund is supporting both a national and several regional nonprofits that are designing assistive gear and facilitated, adaptive programs. These organizations – like Adaptive Adventures, Vermont Adaptive, Catalyst Sports, All Out Adventures and the Outdoors for All Foundation – are heroic in their own right. We are pleased to support them, their vets-focused programs, and their broader mission.

We are also proud to have worked closely with Congress, including this committee and the Committee on Veterans Affairs, on the 2020 passage of the “Task Force on Outdoor Recreation for Veterans,” which was included in the COMPACT Act. The Task Force is now up and running and working across federal agencies and alongside nonprofit stakeholders to help remove barriers to leveraging public lands for the treatment of veterans – effectively starting the conversation around the concept of “prescribing the outdoors” at scale. We are looking forward to seeing what recommendations this Task Force provides Congress.

Initial Comments on the Draft

The draft version of the Military Veterans in Parks Act appropriately prioritizes making some trails accessible to disabled veterans and active duty military and providing needed information about the location of accessible infrastructure across our federal lands. At REI, we strongly believe that the outdoors should be available and accessible for everyone, and we applaud the authors of this draft for taking an important step in finding ways to make public lands more accessible for both active duty military and disabled veterans.

We should – at every level of government – be identifying opportunities and areas to increase access to outdoor recreation for those with disabilities. This legislation would certainly take a significant step in formalizing that at the federal level.

With the understanding that this legislation is currently a draft and subject to changes, I would like to provide some comments about potential changes and additions for the Committee’s consideration as you finalize the text.

First and foremost, this legislation has a focus on our nation’s veterans and military, but this bill really benefits the broader disability community. We would strongly suggest that the direction and focus of the bill be inclusive – fostering accessible infrastructure on public lands for the broader community of people with disabilities. Through conversations with several federal agencies, we know there is good work being done for this community. This legislation would elevate that work and bring additional focus, which we support. The broader disability community deserves that focus and we are hopeful that the final text will ensure those who desperately need this access – our nation’s active duty military, veterans and others across the disability community alike – are able to benefit from it.

In addition, we would like to underscore the awareness-raising aspect of the bill. Accessible trails and other accessible infrastructure are not useful if people who need them do not know they exist. I would encourage the Committee to include guidance on working with veteran's organizations and the disability community to appropriately distribute updated information on where accessible infrastructure exists and, if possible, what might be in the pipeline down the road. If something similar exists today, it is difficult to locate and the current and future work of these agencies deserves a broader audience.

As to the trails and recreation facilities themselves, I would encourage the Committee to aim higher and raise the bill's initial ambitions. One trail and facility per region per agency is a good start and can provide some key learnings, but ideally there would be more initial projects so that people would be able to access them, which will also provide needed information in growing this effort over time. These initial trails could be considered a pilot program for discovery around how to scale this across the country, including providing key learnings to non-federal land management partners in states. The same can be said about the bill's timelines. We would appreciate considering a shorter implementation schedule, if possible.

Lastly, I want to raise a flag around the permitting provisions. REI fully supports permitting reform and, in separate venues, have been trying to advance permitting reform. The SOAR Act, which has been introduced by members of this Committee and is the product of more than a decade's work, will streamline the permitting process on public lands. The permitting process is equally complex and frustrating at times. As the Committee looks to cut red tape around access for veterans and active duty military, I would ask the Committee to take care to avoid undermining permitting reforms and opportunities that will improve access for all lovers of the outdoors. We are happy to discuss specific language changes with the Committee at the appropriate time.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to reiterate how greatly the co-op and I appreciate the chance to testify on this important legislation. My team and I look forward to working with the Committee to ensure our nation's active duty military, its veterans and our disability community have greater access to our public lands. We also look forward to working with you and all stakeholders -- federal agencies, groups that support the military community (like Blue Star Families), veterans organizations, and the disability community -- on innovative ways to make our public lands more accessible. This is important work, which we are honored to be a part of. We look forward to contributing to the next version of this legislation and the bipartisan product that ultimately advances.

I would also applaud the Committee for its parallel work on an outdoor recreation legislative package, America's Outdoor Recreation Act. That legislative package will be historic and will help to both modernize and simplify access to the outdoors. Like the MVP Act, we look forward to the historic passage of that broader piece of legislation.

Thank you for your time.