

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS**

September 19, 2023

Regarding:

**H.R. 3200 – Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act
H.R. 3107 – Improving Outdoor Recreation Coordination Act
H.R. 1657 – Lake Winnibigoshish Land Exchange Act of 2023**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service, regarding various Federal land management bills. USDA defers to the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) as to the effects of these bills on any DOI bureaus and the federal lands under their jurisdiction.

Background

The USDA Forest Service manages 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands, comprising 193 million acres in 41 states and Puerto Rico. National forest and grassland outdoor recreation offers the widest possible array of opportunities to experience Federal lands, which are home to three million acres of lakes, 400,000 miles of streams, 122 Wild and Scenic Rivers for rafting, kayaking and other watersports, and 159,000 miles of trails for horseback riding, hiking, snowmobiling, mountain biking, hunting, and more.

The Forest Service is deeply committed to connecting all Americans to the outdoors, and we value the important role played by outfitters and guides, resorts, non-profit organizations, and other concessioners in connecting people to recreation opportunities in the national forests and grasslands. Outdoor recreation attracts people to visit, live, and work in gateway and rural communities and supports the health, well-being, and economic vitality of those communities. In fiscal year 2021, recreation on National Forest System (NFS) lands contributed more than \$13.7 billion to America's gross domestic product and supported more than 161,500 full and part-time jobs, the vast majority of which are in gateway and rural communities.¹

In fiscal year 2021, there were 156 million recreation visits to national forests and grasslands. When we include the number of people who pass through these beautiful forests and grasslands to enjoy the scenery and travel on scenic roads and byways, that number increases to 456 million

¹ 2021 National Visitor Use Monitoring survey. These numbers reflect total benefits (direct, indirect, and induced).

visits. Recreation pressure has been particularly significant in national forests close to urban areas.

Moreover, the recreation program on NFS lands sustains more private sector jobs per program dollar than any other Forest Service program and provides the single largest economic stimulus for many local communities adjacent to or within NFS boundaries. Outdoor recreation opportunities and amenities are consistently ranked as one of the primary reasons people move to rural towns and can be a leading contributor to small town economies. The Forest Service administers over 30,000 commercial recreation special use authorizations for activities that generate nearly \$2 billion in revenue for special use authorization holders. In particular, the Forest Service administers 127 ski area permits and approximately 8,000 outfitting and guiding permits.

USDA appreciates the recognition by this Subcommittee of the importance of recreation on Federal lands to our national economy, as well as the sustained interest in finding solutions to recreation management challenges. We understand these challenges, and we know that we can further enhance recreation opportunities on Federal lands. Seeking to continue the momentum built through the Great America Outdoors Act and the Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Forest Service has initiated a national strategy and action plan called Reimagine Recreation. The Forest Service is also a foundational member of Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR), which is partnering across all land and water management agencies to better coordinate delivery of opportunities and access for outdoor recreation. This effort will clarify and change the way we deliver recreation opportunities. We are building our vision by engaging with new and diverse audiences.

H.R. 3200 – Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act

H.R. 3200, the “Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act,” requires the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to carry out certain activities to enhance recreational opportunities for gateway communities. The bill also amends the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) to provide for the establishment of a digital National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass.

Section 3 seeks to enhance understanding of the economic impacts of visitation on gateway communities and to identify the needs of those communities, such as housing and other infrastructure necessary to accommodate and manage growing levels of visitation. The bill would require the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to seek to meet the identified needs through a variety of mechanisms under existing law, such as financial assistance, cooperative agreements, and public-private partnerships.

However, Section 3 also includes the provision that USDA can provide financial or technical assistance to a gateway community under an existing program to remedy any identified economic needs, such as housing shortages and to address demands on existing municipal infrastructure. The Forest Service lacks authority to provide direct economic development assistance in gateway or rural communities. Authority for this function rests in USDA-Rural

Development. Forest Service initiatives in the recreation economy space are linked to program authorities. Because the Forest Service lacks any authority to provide financial assistance beyond NFS boundaries, this bill would need to give that authority to the Secretary of Agriculture.

Section 4 of H.R. 3200 requires the National Park Service (NPS) to conduct certain procedures before taking any action that will reduce access to a National Park. USDA defers to the Department of the Interior on any impacts on NPS related to this provision.

Section 5(a) of this bill would require the Secretaries to establish a single visitation data reporting system to report annual visitation data in a consistent manner. Section 5(b) of this bill would require USDA to select five national forests for a pilot program to make visitation data available to the public, including data and resources publicly available from existing nongovernmental platforms. The bill would allow the data to be provided directly by the agency or indirectly through its partners. Within five years of enactment, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior would be required to select an additional 80 units for this program. Section 5 also would require the Secretaries to share information about lesser-known recreation sites through a variety of media platforms to disperse visitation among recreation sites.

The Forest Service currently collects visitor use data and monitors trends in visitor use annually through the National Visitor Use Monitoring program and makes visitation data publicly available on its website. To the extent this bill would require the agency to provide real-time visitor use data to the public, the agency would like to work with the bill sponsor to address technical concerns. USDA would like to work with the Subcommittee and bill sponsors to better understand the visitation data requirements in Section 5 and to make technical improvements to the bill.

Section 6 of this bill would amend existing legislation under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and would require the establishment of digital versions of the America the Beautiful—National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands passes no later than January 1, 2024. Due to technical requirements and the time needed to implement the conversion to digital passes, we recommend amending this deadline to January 1, 2026, to allow sufficient time to implement this change responsibly and effectively.

USDA recognizes the important role and needs of gateway communities in sustaining the recreation economy. We are helping to invest in community well-being, expand the outdoor recreation economy, and provide access to the outdoors for underserved populations. We have partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Northern Border Regional Commission to launch the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities program, which provides planning assistance to help rural communities leverage outdoor recreation as an economic development strategy. USDA Forest Service, Rural Development, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture are also collaborating to support the recreation economies of rural forest gateway communities by providing technical expertise and funding to develop recreation infrastructure and capacity beyond the boundaries of NFS lands. We have identified a strong need to engage across boundaries in more comprehensive recreation planning to identify sustainable solutions to the growing demand for outdoor recreation on Federal and other public

lands. Collaborative, all-lands recreation planning is at the heart of our Reimagine Recreation effort.

USDA supports the goals of H.R. 3200 to enhance recreation opportunities for gateway communities and to provide digital versions of the America the Beautiful—National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands passes. We would welcome an opportunity to work with the Subcommittee and bill sponsors to improve upon the current legislation in support of these goals.

H.R. 3107 – Improving Outdoor Recreation Coordination Act

H.R. 3107 legislatively establishes an interagency council known as the Federal Interagency Council on Recreation (FICOR), composed of representatives from the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Reclamation, Forest Service, United States Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Marine Fisheries Service. Among other purposes, the bill would charge FICOR with coordination of recreation management policies across Federal agencies, including implementation of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (16 U.S.C. 6801 *et seq.*).

On July 20, 2022, the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior and the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that re-established FICOR administratively, with the purpose of creating more safe, affordable, and equitable opportunities for Americans to get outdoors. This MOU renewed and re-energized FICOR, which was originally created administratively in 2011 but was suspended by the previous administration. FICOR provides a focus on improving access to nature, expanding outdoor recreation opportunities, and providing the public with improved and more affordable experiences on America’s public lands and waters.

FICOR has been instrumental in forwarding interagency initiatives promoting youth outdoor activities and policy and data coordination in support of outdoor recreation. The USDA Forest Service is a charter member of FICOR and supports H.R. 3107, which would codify FICOR in statute.

H.R. 1657 – Lake Winnibigoshish Land Exchange Act of 2023

H.R. 1657 would direct the Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service to exchange approximately 13.8 acres of Federal land in Itasca County, Minnesota located in the Chippewa National Forest within the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation boundary for approximately 38 acres of non-Federal land in Itasca County, Minnesota, which is owned by Big Winnie Land and Timber, LLC, (BWLTL). Subject to the provisions of this Act, if BWLTL offers to convey the non-Federal land to the United States, the Secretary shall, not later than 180 days after receiving the offer (1) accept the offer, (2) convey to BWLTL all right, title, and interest of the United States in and to the federal land; and (3) accept from BWLTL all right, title, and interest of BWLTL in and to the nonfederal land. The exchange would be for equal value, or the values shall be equalized by a cash payment, subject to an exception. The land acquired by USDA would be added to and managed as part of Chippewa National Forest.

USDA supports the goals of H.R. 1657, “Lake Winnibigoshish Land Exchange Act of 2023.” The bill would extend benefits to the public by exchanging developed shoreline for a larger, undeveloped parcel in which the Forest Service would no longer need to administer a special use permit. While we are supportive of the bill, the Department has concerns with the 180-day timeframe allotted to complete the exchange. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Subcommittee and the bill sponsor to refine this language and make other technical refinements to meet the bill’s intent.

That concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have for me.