

Testimony of Janessa Goldbeck
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Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources

Statement/Remarks

Good afternoon. My name is Janessa Goldbeck. I'm a service-connected disabled veteran who served just under seven years in the United States Marine Corps as a Combat Engineer Officer. I'm also the CEO of the Vet Voice Foundation, a national advocacy organization that represents more than 1.5 million veterans, military family members and supporters. I appreciate being invited to appear before you today.

At Vet Voice Foundation, we work to ensure veterans and military families have their voices heard by decision-makers – here in Washington and throughout the country. A major area of our focus is on preserving and protecting our nation's public lands – and ensuring all veterans and military families have access to them.

Among all the communities that benefit from public spaces, the military and veterans communities maintain a unique relationship with public lands. From the heights of Mount Katahdin to the deserts of Joshua Tree, our nation's public lands have long provided the necessary refuge and respite from the demands of military service. These are places of reflection, reunion, and healing for veterans and our families.

As long as they're accessible to all.

It's with this point in mind that I appear before you today in support of the bipartisan **Promoting Accessibility on Federal Lands Act**, led by Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury of New Mexico and Congressman Juan Ciscomani of Arizona. This commonsense legislation directs the U.S. Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to conduct a comprehensive assessment of accessibility options for trails, campsites, and facilities on federally managed public lands. Such an assessment will provide a screenshot of where we need to make improvements to ensure all – veterans and non-veterans alike – are able to enjoy our nation's public lands.

Before I joined the Marines, I spent much of my free time outdoors. I think that's a trait shared by many who are drawn to military service. Growing up in Southern California, I surfed San Diego's coastline, section-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, and summited Mount Whitney. Throughout my time on active duty, when I wasn't deployed, public lands were a place I could decompress and reconnect with friends and family - I have incredible memories from the Wheeler Park Wilderness, on the Colorado River, and traversing the Alpine Lakes Wilderness.

But of course, military service takes a toll on your body and mind, whether you served in combat or not. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, post-9/11 veterans like me, have a 43% chance of having a service-connected disability. While disabilities range from minor to extreme, all Veterans stand to benefit from time spent with nature and on our public lands. No one should miss out or be left behind - these lands should be accessible to all.

I know many of you agree with me, and you've taken steps to ensure that. In fact, during the 117th Congress, the **Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoors Act**, as part of the

COMPACT Act, was passed with large bipartisan support and signed into law by President Trump. This legislation, among other charges, instructs the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a taskforce to investigate the benefits of outdoor recreation therapy for veterans. Moreover, veterans joined with many of you – mobilizing and organizing in communities across the nation for years to ensure that the Land and Water Conservation Fund was permanently and fully funded, an effort that was finally achieved with passage of the **Great American Outdoors Act**.

In addition to public lands being part of the toolbox veterans turn to in the wake of their service, public lands have also been paramount in preserving our nation's military history. I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment to thank those of you on the committee who've worked, particularly over the past year, alongside the Biden Administration to safeguard military heritage sites like Camp Hale, Castner Range, and the ongoing efforts to see the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument made a reality.

In closing, veterans and military families have long been central figures in efforts to create, expand, safeguard, and use our nation's greatest treasures – our public lands and waters. From fellow veteran President Teddy Roosevelt, who used the Antiquities Act to protect millions of acres during his presidency to World War II veteran Earl Shaffer, who became the first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail following his service to “walk off the war” to veterans of today who are found utilizing and enjoying public lands in all corners of the country.

Wherever one finds oneself enjoying public lands one will find a veteran close by doing the same. But we must ensure these lands and waters are open and accessible to all. Again - I thank the Subcommittee for inviting me to participate today and I'm hopeful you'll support H.R. 5665, the bipartisan **Promoting Accessibility on Federal Lands Act**.

Thank you.