



Statement of Luis Benitez  
Chief Impact Officer, Trust for Public Land  
Before the House Natural Resource Committee  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
on the *Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (EXPLORE Act)*  
November 30, 2023

---

## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and other members of the subcommittee, and thank you for the opportunity to appear today on behalf of Trust for Public Land to express our support for the EXPLORE Act, with an enthusiastic focus on the bipartisan Outdoors for All Act that you, Chairman Westerman, and Ranking Member Grijalva have included in this important legislation. Your leadership on this bill is a demonstration of your commitment to ensuring everyone has access to a quality park, not just those who can afford to live near one. By codifying and enhancing one critical programmatic expression of that commitment – the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership, or ORLP – that is exactly what the Outdoors for All language will do. This and other critical provisions of your bill will be a huge boost to the outdoor access and experiences Americans need and deserve.

## **My Background**

Mr. Chairman, my name is Luis Benitez, and I serve as Chief Impact Officer for Trust for Public Land (TPL), whose staff I recently joined after a three-year term on TPL's national board of directors. My perspective, though, comes not just from my current day job, but from a connection to outdoor recreation that has been the through-line of my entire career. That experience includes my early days as an Outward Bound instructor, working with young people and adults to help them develop the confidence, critical thinking, and sense of self that only immersive encounters with nature can provide; my time as a climber and guide, having summited the "Seven Summits" a total of 32 times, including six summits of Everest; my gratifying experience as an Eagle, CO City Councilman, and my subsequent appointment by then-Governor, now-Senator John Hickenlooper as the first director of our state's Outdoor Recreation Industry Office; my time in private industry as Vice President of Global Impact and Government Affairs for VF Corporation, the parent company of North Face and other outstanding outdoor brands; and my continuing role as an educator, serving on the faculty of the University of Colorado's Masters of the Environment program.

That history has shown me just how powerful outdoor recreation is as a force in American life. I have seen the economic juggernaut it represents, as affirmed by statistics just released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis showing the outdoor recreation economy now accounts for some \$1.1 trillion annually in economic activity, over 2% of total domestic GDP, and over 3% of all employment – more than 5 million jobs. I have witnessed, up close and

personal, the life-changing impacts it has each time we test ourselves in nature or just pause to take in its magic and majesty. And I have appreciated the surpassing impact it has across the nation at the community level, where economic vitality, public health, and quality of life in our neighborhoods, towns, and cities are all deeply affected by the presence or absence of opportunities for outdoor experiences.

In that light, I am grateful for the broad approach the EXPLORE Act takes to enhancing public access to and experiences on America's public lands. Having overseen outdoor recreation for a state renowned for its natural wonders, I know firsthand the rewards we will reap nationally from the coordinated emphasis the Act would place on a full spectrum of outdoor recreation issues by codifying the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation. I am similarly appreciative of a wide array of provisions in EXPLORE that would lower barriers to outdoor participation and enhance the outdoor experience for countless Americans. And I want to provide some particular focus today on one particular provision of EXPLORE that will address a particular need for community conservation and park access – the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership language adapted, as section 113 of EXPLORE, from the Outdoors for All Act authored by Representatives Nanette Barragán and Mike Turner – and that lies at the heart of Trust for Public Land's support for this legislative package.

### **About Trust for Public Land, and the “Park Access Gap”**

TPL is the leading national nonprofit organization working to connect everyone with the benefits and joys of the outdoors. We create parks collaboratively with communities and local governments so that Americans can have healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

Since 1972, TPL has protected 4 million acres of public land and created 5,364 parks, trails, schoolyards, and iconic outdoor places. We've raised \$94 billion in state and local public funding for parks and public lands; and connected nearly 9.4 million people to the outdoors.

Our mission has become even more critical over the last several years as the entire nation felt the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. When so many indoor places were closed, our nation's public parks and outdoor spaces served as a critical respite for Americans to engage safely with family and friends while also enjoying the outdoors.

That national stress test affirmed what most of us intuitively have long understood, and what key data described below reinforce: outdoor public spaces are an essential part of American life, and that all children and families, regardless of their zip code, should have a quality park or outdoor space close to home, a place to play, exercise, unplug, and connect with others in our communities, with all the benefits that follow. Parks are critical infrastructure that improves quality of life and supports a healthy future, with particularly acute and demonstrated impacts on the physical and emotional well-being of kids, veterans, and others. They are instrumental in promoting well-being, providing crucial nourishment in the form of better physical and mental health, increased social cohesion, relief from heat island effects, and natural defenses from flooding and other extreme weather events. While parks aren't the solution to every problem, they do provide multiple benefits to thriving communities.

At TPL, we believe access to the outdoors is a fundamental human need and an inalienable right, and that all communities are stronger, healthier, and more connected when everyone can get outside and engage with nature. Across the nation, however, over 100 million people, including 28 million children, do not have access to a quality park within a 10-minute walk from home.

Unfortunately, large disparities in park access persist, and they break down along familiar lines especially in low-income communities both in our big cities and our smaller towns. Over the course of TPL's 50-year history, we have seen firsthand the park access gap faced by far too many in this great country: one in three Americans do not live with a park near their home, and those without access disproportionately reside in lower-income areas. In low-income communities, parks are smaller, more crowded, and less well-maintained than parks in higher-income communities. Parks serving primarily low-income households are, on average, four times smaller than parks serving a majority of high-income households.

TPL and our many partners – local community leaders and governments, private foundations and nonprofits, committed members of the House and Senate – are working to change this. We are engaged in these communities and work hand in hand with municipalities and local leaders with the goal of generating investments and funding for more parks. Communities need support from Congress to continue this important work; that is why we are grateful to so many House and Senate members, including many on this Committee, who support Outdoors for All, and to the EXPLORE Act sponsors for recognizing the urgency in including the Barragán-Turner Outdoors for All language in this bill.

## **More on the Benefits of Parks, Particularly in Low-Income Areas**

### **Economic Benefits**

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, the value added of the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 2.2 percent (\$563.7 billion) of current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP) for the nation in 2022. At the state level, value added for outdoor recreation as a share of state GDP ranged from 5.6 percent in Hawaii to 1.4 percent in Connecticut. An investment in local parks is an investment in our nation's economy. Local parks in the US generate more than \$150 billion in economic activity annually, and support over 1.1 million jobs. \$1 million spent on parks creates, on average, between 16 and 23 jobs — on par with job creation rates from highway building.

These cold hard statistics are themselves compelling, but they pale in comparison to the real-world impacts in communities where park investments truly light the way to a better future. Take for example these ORLP success stories:

The Lincoln Park neighborhood is one of the most vulnerable in Duluth, MN with higher unemployment and older housing stock. However, that is changing with the revitalization of Lincoln Park, which celebrated its reopening just over a month ago with help from a \$750,000 ORLP grant to update and rehabilitate this site of one of Minnesota's oldest playgrounds. This 37-acre park was originally constructed in 1908

and was the site of the City's first playground. Today, the park features 1.5 miles of hiking trails, a pavilion, outdoor grills, a playground, and disc golf. ORLP funds were used to design Lincoln Park with accessibility and community needs in mind. The plan included efforts to highlight the historic and cultural significance of the indigenous community. The city worked with the Fond du Lac tribe on including native history and Ojibwe language into the interpretive signage. The revitalization of the park has not only created much needed outdoor cultural and recreation space, the Lincoln Park Craft Business District, is quickly establishing itself as an incubator for entrepreneurs and a shopping and entertainment destination for locals and tourists (<http://www.lisc.org/duluth/what-we-do/economic-development/>).

In the heart of San Francisco, CA a five-block stretch of revitalized urban greenspace will soon welcome nearly 30,000 nearby residents at the Buchanan Mall Park, giving the Fillmore community a place to celebrate the rich history of their neighborhood and a place to inspire hope for a healthier, safer future. The renovated park will provide equitable access to the outdoors and cater to every generation, with a new fitness area, playgrounds, and multi-purpose sport courts in addition to much-needed green space to relax and connect with nature and others within the community.

In Cleveland, OH, Clark Avenue Park will connect two of Cleveland's most densely populated neighborhoods providing direct access to green space for underserved communities where few residents have access to quality open space. The new park will offer much-needed space for the community to enjoy the outdoors with playgrounds, sports facilities, seating, and spaces for future farmers' markets and social gatherings. And the park is expected to generate at least \$2.08 million in economic benefits over the next 10 years.

An additional positive side-effect of this sort of investment is the rise in home values associated with proximate parks. For example, Mississippi State University estimates Three Mile Creek Greenway, in Mobile, AL will raise local property values by 2%. Nationally, a study by John Crompton for NRPA found houses near parks are 8-10% more valuable than houses farther from parks.

### **Health Benefits**

Studies both compiled and conducted by TPL have shown clear health benefits from spending time in parks and open spaces. Those health benefits include both mental and physical. In terms of mental health, exposure to green settings has been shown to decrease stress and improve concentration. Moreover, in children these types of mental health improvements may subsequently result in improved academic achievement and more positive social interactions. Physical health is influenced by a myriad of factors including physical activity. Proximity to parks and open space increases physical activity levels during childhood and adolescence which may have sustained long-term impacts on

physical health as an adult. This could lead to a long-term decrease in health problems like Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and physical strength.

Additionally, parks bring environmental benefits to surrounding neighborhoods, including cooling and flood prevention. A TPL study found that neighborhoods within a 10-minute walk of a wooded park were up to 6 degrees cooler than park-poor areas. A well-designed park can absorb tens of thousands of gallons of storm water and help reduce flooding.

### **Outdoors for All and the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program**

The Outdoors for All provision would codify and improve the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP), ensuring a secure pathway for competitive funding to communities without adequate access to local parks, and that this important program will continue to have lasting impact, and in more communities, nationwide. Giving the program a statutory foundation will give the National Park Service and community leaders a reliable footing from which to make longer-term ORLP plans, and to work together in a sustained fashion. And providing broader benefits to a broader pool of applicant communities will give the program even more reach to the places where it is most needed.

TPL has more experience with the ORLP program than virtually any other organization in the country. TPL worked with Congress to create the program 9 years ago and we have worked with the National Park Service and communities across America since then to leverage ORLP resources on the ground. In that context, I can share that the ORLP improvements that would be authorized under the Outdoors for All language will make a big difference. I would like to highlight three of those crucial improvements:

The Outdoors for All provision will, for the first time, allow for direct ORLP participation by Indian tribes and indigenous communities. Over the years, TPL has worked with more than 70 tribes and Native groups to protect homelands and culturally significant places such as ancestral burial grounds, fishing sites, and lands that supply traditional foods and medicines. Through these efforts we have protected or helped return more than 200,000 acres of land to Native Americans and Native Hawaiians. Our efforts range from restoring ancestral lands to the Kashia Band of Pomo Indians in Northern California, the Nez Perce Tribe in eastern Oregon, and Native Hawaiians. Tribal management and conservation of these lands has delivered the benefits of parks easily as much here as in non-tribal communities, and TPL believes freeing up ORLP to meet these needs is not only appropriate but also necessary.

Adjusting ORLP's population floor for eligible applicants to communities of at 25,000 residents – and allowing two or more adjacent areas to join in “clusters” to apply for ORLP grants – may seem like a technical tweak, but if enacted will expand the program's reach to hundreds more cities and towns. This change will significantly increase the applicant pool and raise the competitive bar, ensuring an even better complement of annual projects. At the same time, by allowing community clusters to apply together in partnership on outdoor recreation lands of shared importance to them, it

will facilitate participation by smaller and more rural municipalities that may not have the capacity to apply on their own.

Codifying the program and including explicit reporting requirements will bring an added measure of transparency and accountability to ORLP. TPL firmly believes in striking while the iron is hot through the establishment of pilot programs that do not necessarily entail regular-order authorization; once these programs have proven their worth, as the ORLP program certainly has, they ought to be enshrined in federal law to provide lasting value for the American people.

## **Conclusion**

Parks are not ‘nice-to-have’ amenities; they are ‘must-have’ public infrastructure. They provide multiple benefits to the communities that rely upon them. And now is the time to work together to ensure these benefits are available to more of the neighborhoods that need them most.

That is why we are pleased to see the Outdoors for All language included in the EXPLORE Act. With that language, we fully support the Committee’s work to advance this legislation, and we look forward to working with you to enact comprehensive recreation legislation that expands ORLP’s reach as we have discussed. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.