

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR
CONGRESSIONAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL
RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS CONCERNING THE
DISCUSSION DRAFT OF H.R. _____, THE EXPLORE ACT**

NOVEMBER 30, 2023

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department) on the discussion draft of H.R. _____, the EXPLORE Act. This discussion draft includes multiple individual measures related to outdoor recreation and resource management on Federal lands, many of which have been first introduced as separate bills in this Congress.

Federal land management agencies oversee approximately 640 million surface acres. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for approximately 245 million acres, while the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages another 193 million acres. Most other Federal land is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), with over 95 million acres, and the National Park Service (NPS), with approximately 80 million acres. The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also manage Federal lands used for recreation.

The Department's bureaus, including the BLM, FWS, NPS, and Reclamation, contribute to its overall recreation mission and the Secretary's recreation and equitable access priorities. The National Park System, which preserves some of our nation's most important national treasures, hosts over 300 million visitors annually. The public lands managed by the BLM host a remarkable variety of recreational activities and received more than 73 million recreational visits in 2022— an increase of three million visits from 2019. The National Wildlife Refuge System welcomes more than 67 million visitors annually and provides world-renowned places for visitors to engage in wildlife-dependent recreational activities, such as birding, fishing, and hunting. The water projects of Reclamation, which is the largest wholesale water supplier in the nation, are among America's most popular sites for water-based outdoor recreation.

Our Nation's federal lands, waters, and the fish, wildlife and plants they support are an important resource for the American public. These places provide a diversity of outdoor recreation experiences for tens of millions of Americans each day and improve the social well-being of urban and rural communities across the United States. These recreational opportunities are supported by agency work both on and off Federal lands. Outdoor recreation also contributes significantly to the national economy and the economies of local communities.

Significant investments from the Great American Outdoors Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and recent emergency disaster supplemental appropriations have supported the NPS, BLM, and FWS in addressing critical needs and enhancing or recovering the visitor experience. Yet, these Federal land management bureaus face many of the

same challenges and constraints that other Federal agencies, cities, towns, organizations, and businesses face across the country.

The individual provisions of the discussion draft are representative of the wide range of issues and interests that Federal land management agencies are responsible for managing on behalf of the American people. The Department appreciates the willingness of Congress to engage with these complex issues thoughtfully and is broadly supportive of congressional efforts to provide the various Federal land management agencies under its jurisdiction with greater authorities and flexibility to respond, based on the best available data and evidence, to changing needs and evolving challenges in a time of increased visitation to our Federal lands.

The Department has previously testified on many of the provisions of the discussion draft of H.R. ____, the EXPLORE Act, in prior hearings in the 117th and 118th Congresses. Although we have been supportive of the goals of many of these provisions in testimony, we have opposed or expressed significant concerns on other provisions. We have appreciated the interest from the Committee in working with the Department to address the concerns the Department previously identified through testimony, proposed amendments, and technical assistance. However, it is important that we continue to further review the discussion draft to better understand how these concerns and recommendations have been addressed, as well as to analyze the implications that these and several new provisions might have for the management of resources and services by the Department's bureaus. After this review, we would like to provide additional recommendations and comments, including technical amendments, before the committee moves forward with this legislation.

We defer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding provisions affecting the management of lands administered by the USFS.

Title I: Outdoor Recreation and Infrastructure

The first title of the discussion draft includes a declaration of policy that states the Federal Government's interest in fostering and encouraging recreation, directs Federal land management agencies to identify recreation opportunities, and requires the Office of Management and Budget to produce a crosscut budget report related to the funding of outdoor recreation. It statutorily establishes the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, a multi-agency council including representatives from the BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs, FWS, NPS, Reclamation, USFS, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

This title of the discussion draft also addresses many important recreation issues on Federal lands and waters. Topics include biking on long distance trails, rock climbing and filming on Federal lands, motorized and nonmotorized access maps on certain public lands, and invasive species prevention on Federal lands and waters, among other provisions. The discussion draft also considers the impacts of increased visitation on Federal lands and waters and on the communities that are adjacent to them, as well as broadband connectivity at developed recreation sites.

This title of the discussion draft also focuses on partnerships to address issues including housing options for Federal employees, cooperative management of Federal lands and waters,

campground modernization on certain public lands, and parking opportunities at certain Federal developed recreation sites.

Finally, this title of the discussion draft would codify the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership grant program.

Title II: Access America

The second title of the discussion draft focuses on access to Federal lands and waters. This title would require the Federal land management agencies to carry out a comprehensive assessment of outdoor recreation facilities under their jurisdiction with the goal of enhancing access for individuals with disabilities. This title also directs the Federal land management agencies to work in partnership with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Defense to promote outdoor recreation to veterans and military servicemembers and to liaise with the Department of Veterans Affairs toward that effort. This title also directs the Federal land management agencies to jointly develop a strategy for increasing the number of young people visiting Federal recreation lands and waters and reauthorizes the popular Every Kid Outdoors program for several years.

Title III: Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation

The third title of the discussion draft makes changes to the authorizations that Federal land management agencies use to authorize and permit certain providers of recreation services on Federal lands and waters. The discussion draft would amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and make changes to the process for administration and issuance of special recreation permits and requirements related to concessioner liability. The discussion draft would also extend the sunset date of FLREA through fiscal year 2031 and directs the agencies to consider extending recreation seasons. This title would also replace and amend the Service First authority and would modify volunteer programs conducted by the Federal land management agencies. Finally, this title provides a good neighbor authority for recreation services and makes other changes to the authorities that govern permits issued by Federal land management agencies.

The Department appreciates the efforts of the Committee to engage on these complex and important issues and looks forward to closely reviewing this discussion draft and working with the Committee and providing additional recommendations and comments, including technical amendments, on this draft legislation. Through its land management bureaus, the Department is continually striving to improve its ability to provide outstanding recreational opportunities while preserving and protecting the incredible resources the land management bureaus were established to steward. The discussion draft of H.R. ____, the EXPLORE Act, represents an important opportunity to support those goals.

Chairman Tiffany, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.