

Ben Burr, Executive Director, BlueRibbon Coalition

Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 9248, the Recreation Permitting Improvement Act

July 1, 2026

Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Ben Burr, and I serve as Executive Director of the BlueRibbon Coalition, a national nonprofit that has advocated for recreational access to America's public lands since 1987. We represent members in all fifty states — the families, small businesses, and gateway communities whose lives are organized around access to the lands and waters this Committee oversees.

I want to begin with a place where that access has just been taken away, because it shows what is at stake in a bill that looks, at first glance, like a technical correction.

The West Mojave

This spring, a federal court ordered roughly 2,200 miles of designated routes across California's West Mojave closed, after finding that the Bureau of Land Management's travel-management analysis did not satisfy the law. I am not here to relitigate that ruling. I am here to describe what it does to the people who live at the edge of those routes. The small desert communities scattered throughout the riding areas — the fuel stops, the diners, the motels, the outfitters and repair shops — survive on the visitors who come to ride. Of these communities, the small desert town of Randsburg is going to be the hardest hit. A closure measured in years is not a hardship they weather; for many of them, it is a closure of their own. A shop that loses a riding season does not reopen when the routes do. It is simply gone, and the town that has avoided becoming a ghost town for over a century, will become one.

What those communities need right now is hope — a credible reason to believe the closure is bounded, that there is a date on the other side of it. And that is exactly what today's permitting system fails to give them. The routes stay closed until BLM produces a travel-management plan that satisfies the court. That redo is a federal undertaking requiring coordination between BLM and the Fish and Wildlife Service, with the consultation that listed-species law requires — and there is no timetable holding it together, no published schedule, no single official accountable for finishing it. The regulatory framework underlying the original deficiency has since changed, so the agency's task is not to re-defend a standard that already failed, but to build a sound plan under current law. What matters now is that the plan actually gets finished, on a schedule the community can see. An open-ended remand is an open wound. A finalized decision, with the routes lawfully reopened, is the thing that lets a town plan its next season.

The BlueRibbon Coalition sought to participate directly in that litigation and was not permitted to intervene. It is in part because that door closed that I am here today, asking Congress for a tool that works upstream of the courtroom. We need a way to give these reviews a deadline and a coordinated process before the closure, not years after it.

What H.R. 9248 Does

That tool already exists. It is called FAST-41, and for nearly a decade it has helped large, complex infrastructure projects move through federal permitting on a predictable schedule. H.R. 9248 does one thing: it adds recreation to the list of sectors eligible to use it.

The bill is two sentences. It amends the definition of “covered project” in Section 41001(6)(A) of the FAST Act — codified at 42 U.S.C. § 4370m(6)(A) — by inserting the single word “recreation” into a list of eligible sectors that today runs to nineteen entries, from energy and transmission to broadband, pipelines, and semiconductors. Recreation is conspicuously absent from that list, even though recreation projects on federal land routinely trigger the same multi-agency reviews and environmental impact statements that FAST-41 was built to coordinate.

I want to be precise about what this does and does not do, because the modesty of the text is the point. It changes no environmental law. FAST-41 does not amend, waive, or weaken the National Environmental Policy Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, or any other statute, and it predetermines the outcome of no permit. What a covered project receives is coordination: a designated lead agency, a published permitting timetable with synchronized deadlines, a dedicated advisor, and a public dashboard that lets applicants, agencies, and citizens all see where a project stands. It is voluntary. And critically for recreation, it does not depend on a project being enormous — while the best-known eligibility path is reserved for projects likely to cost more than \$200 million, the statute contains a separate discretionary pathway, with no dollar threshold, for any project that is subject to NEPA and complex enough to require an environmental impact statement or the involvement of more than two federal agencies. That is the door recreation walks through, and almost every example I will give you fits it.

The Mountains

Consider the ski areas on our national forests. When a resort on federal land wants to add a lift, cut a run, or expand its boundary, the change must be approved by the Forest Service through environmental review. Those reviews now routinely run for years.

I will start with one I know personally. Brian Head, in southern Utah’s Dixie National Forest, is my home mountain. Last year the Forest Service began an environmental impact statement on a proposed expansion there, and by the agency’s own published schedule, the final decision is not expected for roughly three years — from a 2025 start to a 2028 record of decision — for a single resort’s terrain plan, before a single lift is approved. That is the expected timeline if nothing slips.

Things often slip. In Congressman Hurd’s own state, the picture is the same. Winter Park submitted its master development plan to the Forest Service in 2022; years later, its Vasquez Mountain expansion is still working through federal review. And when these reviews run their full course, the arc is long: Arapahoe Basin’s Beavers expansion entered scoping in 2013 and did not reach a decision until 2016 — a multi-year environmental impact statement for terrain that skiers can access today only because the process, eventually, ended. None of these projects was stalled by bad faith. They were slowed by the ordinary friction of an environmental impact statement colliding with an under-resourced agency — exactly the friction a coordinated timetable is designed to manage.

The Reservoirs

The clearest case of all is on the water.

The reservoirs of the Colorado River system were built for water and power, but Americans have spent three generations turning them into something more. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area — Lake Powell — drew 4.7 million visitors in 2024, who spent an estimated \$517 million in surrounding communities and supported roughly 4,830 local jobs, generating some \$634 million in economic output. Downstream, Lake Mead National Recreation Area drew 6.4 million visitors that year, whose \$408 million in spending supported about 3,660 jobs and \$553 million in output — the economic foundation of Boulder City. The same pattern holds at Colorado’s largest body of water. Blue Mesa Reservoir, in Curecanti National Recreation Area, anchors the visitor economy of Gunnison and Montrose counties, drawing roughly 981,000 visitors in 2024 whose spending of about \$51.5 million supported 412 local jobs and some \$57 million in economic output. Page, Arizona lives on this. So do Boulder City, Nevada; Gunnison, Colorado; and Kanab and Hanksville, Utah, whose outfitters, fuel stops, and guide services are woven into the access these waters provide. That is not an incidental byproduct of a water project. That is an economy.

When the water drops, that economy does not pause — it breaks in specific, traceable ways. Marinas are stranded on dry ground. Boat ramps close mid-season. The Elk Creek marina at Blue Mesa has had to be physically relocated to deeper water; ramps at Lake Powell and Lake Mead have been chased downhill at a cost of well over a hundred million dollars. And every one of those fixes — the relocated marina, the extended ramp, the access road built to reach receding water — is a federal undertaking that runs through the Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service, and, where listed species are present, the Fish and Wildlife Service, with no synchronized timetable holding the review together. The infrastructure is perpetually behind the shoreline instead of ahead of it, and the gap is measured in lost seasons for real businesses in real towns.

This is the conviction behind the BlueRibbon Coalition’s own model legislation, the Colorado River Abundance Act, which would for the first time declare recreation a coequal purpose of the reservoir system alongside water supply, hydropower, and flood control. The act requires modernization plans, with real deadlines, for the marinas and ramps that gateway communities depend on. The premise of that proposal and the premise of H.R. 9248 are the same: when recreation is treated as an afterthought to the “primary” purposes of a federal project, the cost is not abstract. It lands on a marina operator in Gunnison, a guide in Page, a motel owner in Kanab.

Conclusion

Every place I have described — the closed routes of the West Mojave, the mountains waiting years for a decision, the marinas stranded above the waterline — shares one feature. In each, recreation was treated as an afterthought, and a real community paid for it. These communities are not asking for a shortcut around environmental law. They are asking for what every other major sector already has: a coordinated, predictable process, and a date they can plan around. They are asking for hope.

Congressman Hurd’s bill delivers that hope in a single word. By adding “recreation” to the sectors eligible for coordinated federal permitting, H.R. 9248 makes a modest change in the statute and a profound one in the lives of the people who depend on these lands and waters. BlueRibbon

Coalition supports the bill, and I respectfully urge its favorable consideration. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.