



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: Subcommittee on Federal Lands Republican Members
From: Subcommittee on Federal Lands Staff: Aniela Butler (Aniela@mail.house.gov) and Hannah Devereaux (Hannah.Devereaux@mail.house.gov); x6-7736
Date: Monday, January 19, 2026
Subject: Oversight Hearing on “*EXPLORE America250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act*”

The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will hold an oversight hearing on “*EXPLORE America250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act*.”

The hearing will take place on **Wednesday, January 21, 2026, at 10:15 a.m.** in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.

Member offices are requested to notify Will Rodriguez (Will.Rodriguez@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, January 20, 2026, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- In 2026, our nation’s semiquincentennial year, more Americans than ever will explore the abundant opportunities that our national parks and public lands provide to camp, hunt, fish, hike, rock climb, bike, paddle, horseback ride, and ski, among other activities.
- In the 118th Congress, Chairman Westerman’s EXPLORE Act was comprehensive, bipartisan, and bicameral legislation that increased access to outdoor recreation opportunities and helped unleash the full potential of the \$1.2-trillion outdoor recreation economy.
- This first-of-its-kind legislation improved access and transformed outdoor recreation experiences for military servicemembers, veterans, Gold Star Families, individuals with disabilities, kids, sportsmen and women, and countless others across the nation.
- By streamlining recreation permitting, cutting red tape for recreation service providers, and modernizing technology to improve visitor services, the EXPLORE Act continues to deliver wins for small businesses and rural, gateway economies.
- Under President Trump, Secretary Burgum, and Secretary Rollins, federal land management agencies have already aggressively begun implementing the EXPLORE Act, optimally positioning our national parks and public lands for increased visitation during the nation’s 250th anniversary.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Administration Witnesses)

- **Mr. Thomas Heinlein**, Assistant Director for National Conservation Lands and Community Partnerships, Bureau of Land Management, Washington, DC
- **Mr. Gordon “Gordie” Blum**, Associate Deputy Chief, U.S. Forest Service, Washington, DC

Panel II (Outside Experts)

- **Ms. Jess Turner**, President, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, Washington, DC
- **Mr. Taylor Schmitz**, Senior Vice President, Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, Washington, DC
- **Mr. Jason Curry**, Director, Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation, Salt Lake City, UT
- **Mr. David Duncan**, President, American Battlefield Trust, Washington, DC
- **Mr. Matt Wade**, Executive Director, American Mountain Guides Association, Boulder, CO *[Minority Witness]*
- **Mr. Louis Geltman**, Vice President of Policy & Government Relations, Outdoor Alliance, Washington, DC *[Minority Witness]*

III. BACKGROUND

Part One: What the EXPLORE Act Delivered

Overview



Rock climbing in Yosemite National Park. **Source:** Miranda Oakley, no date.

Federal lands support a wide range of outdoor recreation activities including hiking, biking, rock climbing, camping, paddling, skiing, hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting. More Americans than ever are choosing to recreate outdoors at national parks and public lands, and visitation is only expected to grow during the nation’s 250th anniversary.

year.¹ In 2024 alone, federal land management agencies recorded more than 642 million visitors, including approximately 332 million visitors to National Park Service (NPS) sites, 69 million to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) refuges, 81 million to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands, and 160 million to U.S. Forest Service (USFS) areas.² Outdoor recreation on public lands is also a major economic engine, particularly for rural and gateway communities. The outdoor recreation sector generates \$1.2 trillion annually, contributing \$639.5 billion (2.3 percent) of gross domestic product, supporting nearly 21 million jobs, and generating \$59.2 billion in state and local tax revenue.³ Growth in the outdoor recreation economy (3.6 percent) continues to outpace that of the overall U.S. economy (2.9 percent).⁴

To meet the growing visitation demand and prepare federal lands for America's 250th birthday, Congress enacted the "Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act," which modernized the federal recreation framework and equipped agencies with the tools necessary to deliver high-quality, modern visitor experiences.⁵ Sponsored by Chairman Bruce Westerman (R-AR-04) and the late Ranking Member Raul Grijalva (D-AZ-07), EXPLORE was the first-ever comprehensive outdoor recreation package and passed both the House and the Senate unanimously.⁶ The following sections highlight some of the EXPLORE Act's key provisions.

Modernizing Recreation Infrastructure

EXPLORE supported a variety of recreation activities through improved trail development, updated and digital recreation maps, campsite restoration, and facility upgrades. First, Sections 141 through 143 improved visitor experiences by facilitating increased broadband deployment in national parks and developed recreation sites, such as campgrounds. Second, the legislation supported the growing mountain biking industry by incentivizing the creation of new long-distance bike trails.⁷ Increases in ridership have pushed current trails to the limit, necessitating the creation of new trails to meet high demand for biking opportunities. Finally, Section 127 modernized motorized and non-motorized access by directing USFS and BLM to update vehicle and over-snow route maps, expanding opportunities for motorized and non-motorized vehicles.⁸ As they are implemented, these reforms will enable visitors to navigate federal lands more

¹ Allie McCreary & Michael Brunson, "As National Park visitor numbers hit record highs, here's how to adapt for a better experience," National Park Explorer, September 3, 2025, <https://natlpark.com/2025/09/as-national-park-visitor-numbers-hit-record-highs-heres-how-to-adapt-for-a-better-experience/>.

² National Park Service, "Visitation Numbers," <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/visitation-numbers.htm>; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Announces National Visitor Survey Results," September 19, 2025, <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2025-09/the-us-fish-and-wildlife-service-announces-national-visitor-survey-results#:~:text=A%20national%20wildlife%20refuge%20is,national%20wildlife%20refuges%20every%20year>; Bureau of Land Management, "Celebrating the power of public lands through tourism and community impact," May 5, 2025, <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2025-05-05/celebrating-power-public-lands-through-tourism-and-community-impact>; U.S. Forest Service, "By the Numbers," August 2025, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/newsroom/by-the-numbers#:~:text=How%20many%20people%20visit%20national,Woodsy%20Owl%20and%20Smokey%20Bear>.

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023", November 20, 2024, <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ EXPLORE Act, H.R. 6492, Public Law 118-234, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/6492/text>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Swapnil Palwe, "Mountain Bike Market," Market Research Future, March 2023, <https://www.marketresearchfuture.com/reports/mountain-bike-market-5165>.

⁸ *Id.*

reliably, support year-round recreation in gateway communities, and strengthen the outdoor recreation economy.

Supporting America's Sportsmen and Conservation Tradition

Reliable access to federal lands and waters is crucial for the approximately 32 million Americans who engage in target shooting annually and the 101.6 million Americans (or roughly 40 percent of the population over the age of 16) who engage in some type of hunting, fishing, or wildlife-related activity.⁹ Hunting, shooting, and trapping make up the third-largest share of economic activity among conventional outdoor recreation activities,

generating \$27.3 billion in

annual economic output.¹⁰ The EXPLORE Act strengthens our nation's hunting heritage by promoting access, safety, and facility stewardship for sportsmen and women. Specifically, Section 123 directed USFS and BLM to assess and publicly identify gaps in developed shooting ranges and, where feasible, support the construction or partnership-based establishment of safe, purpose-built facilities. This will ensure that target shooting ranges on public lands remain affordable and accessible and that access is not eliminated by default. EXPLORE also resolved several practical access issues relevant to hunters and anglers. This includes allowing NPS to donate capes, horns, and antlers to volunteers who conduct wildlife management activities on NPS land; authorizing aquatic invasive species inspection and decontamination programs to protect boating and fisheries access; and allowing filming and content-creation crews on federal lands, an increasingly important tool to promote safety, education, and recruitment.¹¹ Together, these reforms support safer, more reliable access for sportsmen and women to celebrate America's 250th anniversary.



Target shooting helps encourage new generations of sportsmen and women.

Source: U.S. Forest Service, no date.

Reconnecting Servicemembers and Veterans with the Public Lands They Defended

Title II of the EXPLORE Act strengthens the longstanding connection between veterans and America's public lands by reducing barriers to access, expanding recreation opportunities, and improving coordination among the federal land management agencies and the U.S. Departments

⁹ Department of the Interior, "New 5-Year Report Shows 101.6 Million Americans Participated in Hunting, Fishing & Wildlife Activities," September 7, 2017,

<https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/new-5-year-report-shows-1016-million-americans-participated-hunting-fishing-wildlife>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports, "The National Hunting and Shooting Sports R3 Practitioner's Guide", 2024, <https://cahss.org/marketing-to-recruit-retain-and-reactivate-participants/>.

of Veterans Affairs (VA) and War (DOW). Grounded in research showing that outdoor recreation bolsters physical and mental health for veterans, this Title II directed the development of educational materials for service members about recreation opportunities, facilitated public-private partnerships with organizations specializing in recreation experiences for veterans, and required a national strategy to increase visits to federal lands by members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and Gold Star Families.¹² Title II also established a pilot program to prioritize hiring veterans in recreation-focused positions, encouraging veterans to reconnect with the lands they bravely fought for and defended.

Additionally, Title II improves accessibility at federal recreation sites by directing the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and the Interior (DOI) to assess trails, campsites, docks, and recreation facilities; develop new accessible trails and recreation opportunities; and publish standardized accessibility information in a centralized format. These provisions will enable families to plan visits with confidence; accelerate minor retrofits and assistive technology deployment; and expand access for wounded warriors, individuals with mobility limitations, and others with disabilities, who comprise 28.7 percent of American adults.¹³

Expanding and Improving Good Neighbor Authority

The EXPLORE Act made two important changes to the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program, which allows states, Tribes, and counties to conduct important cross-boundary work on federal lands. First, the legislation amended the existing GNA statute to place Tribes and counties on par with states regarding the retention of timber receipts.¹⁴ This eliminated a prior disparity that had disincentivized Tribes and counties from partnering on vital forest management projects, leading to over-grown forests and limiting rural economic opportunities. Second, EXPLORE expanded the GNA program from covering solely timber sales to including outdoor recreation infrastructure projects as well. Under this new authority, states, Tribes, and counties may help construct and maintain facilities such as shooting ranges, boat ramps, docks, and trailheads. This model is a win-win, as the federal government does not have to spend taxpayer money to upgrade its infrastructure and non-federal partners can quickly upgrade this infrastructure, which in turn benefits local tourism and revenue streams.

Celebrating America's History Through Battlefields

Our nation's battlefields are hallowed sites that showcase the sacrifices, struggles, trials, and triumphs that have shaped our great nation. Battlefield sites from the American Revolution to the Civil War serve as outdoor classrooms, ensuring that future generations can learn about the conflicts that forged our nation's destiny. The EXPLORE Act enhanced the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) to better tell our country's story during our 250th anniversary. Specifically, EXPLORE allowed educational institutions and non-profits to receive assistance under the ABPP; clarified that ABPP applies only to battlefields, not associated historic sites; and allowed ABPP assistance to be used on high-priority battlefields owned by states, Tribes, or

¹² Nancy Qwynne Lackey, et al., "Mental health benefits of nature-based recreation: a systematic review," *Annals of Leisure Research*, (2021) 24:3, 379-393.

¹³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability Impacts All of Us," July 15, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>.

¹⁴ 16 U.S.C. 2113a.

local governments. These technical improvements to the program incentivized greater collaboration with non-federal partners in the protection and interpretation of battlefields, ensuring that they will continue educating the future generations.

Keeping Bureaucracy Out of Recreation

Section 122 of the EXPLORE Act permanently protected rock climbers' responsible use of fixed anchors in wilderness destinations. During the Biden administration, NPS and USFS announced a proposed directive that numerous outdoor recreationists slammed as jeopardizing climber safety and limiting access.¹⁵ The EXPLORE Act remedied this misguided policy by codifying the use of fixed anchors in wilderness areas, creating certainty for the rock-climbing community and ensuring the continuation of rock climbing on public lands.

Streamlining Permitting and Supporting Small Businesses

In modernizing permitting for visitors, guides, outfitters, and community organizations, standardizing key permitting concepts across agencies, and facilitating predictable timelines, transparent fee structures, and online availability, Title III of the EXPLORE Act represents a considerable achievement. The Act increases flexibility and expands the public's safe access to federal lands by enabling temporary permits, allowing "substantially similar" activities, improving agency coordination for multijurisdictional trips, and creating mechanisms to reallocate unused permit capacity.¹⁶ Additional user-facing improvements, including digital passes, coordinated fee payments, and extended shoulder-season access, will support rural and gateway communities that rely on recreation while strengthening visitor services in preparation for increased visitation during the Semiquincentennial.

Part Two: EXPLORE Implementation Building Towards America250

Early Momentum on Implementation

Shortly after EXPLORE's passage, DOI initiated a framework to expedite the implementation of key provisions ahead of America's 250th anniversary.¹⁷ On June 25, 2025, Secretary Doug Burgum signed Secretarial Order (S.O) 3435, which designated Deputy Secretary Kate MacGregor as DOI's implementation lead, directed agency bureaus to assign team leads and resources, and identified core provisions to prioritize for implementation.¹⁸ This S.O. also reactivated the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) to improve coordination across federal agencies, states, Tribes, and private partners, as recreation programs scale to meet public demand.¹⁹ Complementing this action, S.O. 3426 directed national parks and national historic sites to remain open and accessible, required review of proposed reduction

¹⁵ Access Fund, "New NPS and USFS Proposals Would Limit Climbing and Threaten Iconic Routes," November 17, 2023, <https://www.accessfund.org/latest-news/new-nps-and-usfs-proposals-would-limit-climbing-and-threaten-iconic-routes>.

¹⁶ Mark K. DeSantis, "Guides and Outfitters on Federal Lands: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, June 14, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46381>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Secretarial Order 3435: Implementation of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order/so-3435-implementation-expanding-public-lands-outdoor-recreation>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

in visitor services, mandated reporting on operating hours and staffing, and supported efforts to ensure parks are properly resourced for visitation.²⁰ These steps have generated measurable progress. DOI reports that it is meeting all statutory deadlines, aligning activities with S.O. 3435, and coordinating across bureaus, states, Tribes, and partners at a regular cadence.²¹ Together, these S.O.s signal a strong commitment to implementing the EXPLORE Act as Congress intended: strengthening access, improving the visitor experience, and preparing federal recreation assets for increased public use during the Semiquincentennial. Below are some of the highlights of EXPLORE’s implementation over the past year.

Supporting Gateway Communities and Rural Economies

The economic benefits of recreation on federal lands stretch beyond park entrance gates and into surrounding areas, often referred to as gateway communities. In 2024, visitors to national parks generated a record high of \$56.3 billion in economic output and spent an estimated \$29 billion in gateway communities.²² Despite this activity, national parks and gateway communities face pressing challenges, including overcrowding, a lack of affordable housing, and outdated technologies. Title I of the EXPLORE Act addressed these issues head-on. NPS, for example, has followed the legislation to make early progress in strengthening relationships with gateway communities. All 433 park units now have designated Gateway Community Coordinators to improve communication between parks and local leaders.²³ This improved coordination has led NPS to conduct quarterly meetings that have engaged more than 1,200 participants across 1,000 communities and 231 chambers of commerce.²⁴ Similarly, DOI has also created an internal coordination hub and begun identifying workforce housing sites to help communities meet staffing and visitation needs.²⁵

Success Stories for Sportsmen’s Access

Range access has emerged as an early implementation priority for both DOI and USFS. DOI reports that approximately 80 percent of BLM districts are already compliant with the EXPLORE Act’s criteria for developed target shooting ranges, with only nine of 48 districts lacking qualified ranges under the new statutory criteria.²⁶ BLM has initiated direct outreach to governors to identify candidate sites, and the agency expects to have potential BLM locations identified by mid-February 2026.²⁷ Based on current assessments, approximately nine to ten developed target shooting ranges are anticipated to open in the coming years.²⁸ BLM has also begun evaluating existing ranges for capacity and upgrade opportunities in light of EXPLORE. To accelerate delivery, BLM is developing GIS-based mapping that will ultimately be released to

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Secretarial Order 3426: Ensuring National Parks Are Open and Accessible*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order/so-3426-ensuring-national-parks-are-open-and-accessible>.

²¹ *Id.*

²² National Park Service, “Visitor Spending Effects - Economic Contributions of National Park Visitor Spending,” September 10, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>.

²³ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

the public to provide more information about the availability of target-shooting opportunities.²⁹ Complementing DOI’s progress, USFS reports that 122 operating target ranges across 93 ranger districts are fully compliant with the EXPLORE Act criteria.³⁰ In addition, 74 units have general forest plan alignment that authorizes the expansion of shooting sports infrastructure, positioning USFS to support long-term range development through partner agreements.³¹

These key provisions of the EXPLORE Act have had tangible, meaningful, on-the-ground effects for sportsmen and women. For instance, in August 2024, during the Biden administration, the BLM’s Salt Lake Field Office proposed a temporary two-year target shooting restriction at West Mountain near Payson and Genola, Utah, citing public health and safety concerns.³² This proposal would have significantly limited access for Utah’s sportsmen and women, who rely on target shooting

ranges for affordable, accessible target practice. However, in August 2025, BLM cancelled this closure “due to a change in agency direction and requirements resulting from the recently enacted EXPLORE Act.”³³ This reversal is a welcome announcement for Utah’s sportsmen and women, who will now retain long-term access to this vital range.



Target shooters on BLM land in West Mountain, Utah.

Source: BLM, 2023.

Reimagining Recreation Infrastructure and Enabling Partner-led Projects

DOI and USFS are also advancing campground and recreation infrastructure projects through the EXPLORE Act’s recreation-related expansions to GNA.³⁴ USFS is expected to provide draft guidance in the coming months and will cover a broad set of eligible recreation assets, including trails, campsites, cabins, restrooms, piers, shooting ranges, ski areas, roads, and boat ramps.³⁵ USFS identified 14 “early adopter” forests to pilot the expansion of GNA for recreation and has already initiated 10 new GNA agreements that include recreation activities.³⁶ In particular, USFS successfully used GNA to reconstruct the Virginia Creeper Trail, restoring a marquee recreation asset and major economic driver in southwest Virginia that supports gateway communities and

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Bureau of Land Management, “Temporary Public Safety Target Shooting Restriction Area on West Mountain,” August 7, 2025, <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2034172/510>.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

coordinated trail tourism.³⁷ NPS has likewise initiated two GNA agreements, currently in the Financial Assistance Review phase, at Acadia National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway.³⁸ Allowing Tribes and counties to be full partners under traditional GNA authority has also had several early success stories. The Nez Perce Tribe was the first Tribe to use GNA for timber harvest following the EXPLORE Act's technical corrections.³⁹ USFS also deployed GNA extensively for post-storm cleanup and recreation repairs in western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and parts of Virginia following Hurricane Helene—aid that would not have been possible if EXPLORE had not reauthorized GNA.⁴⁰

Separately, BLM is also advancing campground and recreation infrastructure projects through EXPLORE Act directives. At the Wedge Recreation Area in Emery County, Utah, BLM has entered the public scoping phase for a multi-phase project that would add new campgrounds, enhance existing group sites, develop up to seven miles of bike trails, improve motorized access, increase day-use parking, upgrade overlooks, expand restrooms, and install visitor information.⁴¹ Similarly, BLM initiated an environmental assessment for the proposed Beas Lewis Flat Campground near Capitol Reef National Park in Wayne County, Utah, following an 81 percent increase in park visitation between 2014 and 2024.⁴² The project would convert unmanaged, dispersed camping into a developed campground with sanitation, hardened access, and improved visitor services to accommodate demand and improve recreation opportunities.

Advancing Title II: Access America

DOI has prioritized implementation of Title II (Access America), which expands recreation opportunities for servicemembers, veterans, youth, and individuals with disabilities. DOI has elevated the establishment of the Military Veterans Outdoor Recreation Liaison position as an early implementation milestone to ensure coordination across USDA, DOI, DOW, and VA.⁴³ USFS has similarly established this Liaison position, who is currently the lead for a new military and veterans working group under FICOR to support the development of the national strategy for military and veteran recreation required by Section 224.⁴⁴ To expand mobility access, DOI and USFS have both begun identifying potential accessible trail candidates using existing trail inventories, which will inform development of new accessible recreation opportunities for individuals with disabilities under Sections 213, 214, and 215.⁴⁵ Agencies are prioritizing

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Bureau of Land Management, “Public Scoping – Wedge Recreation Area Sustainable Campgrounds and Developments (DOI-BLM-UT-G020-2025-0012-EA),” June 11, 2025, https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fplanning.blm.gov%2Fpublic_projects%2F2038413%2F200653119%2F20135795%2F251035775%2FScoping%2520Document%2520Wedge%2520Recreation%2520Area%2520Developments%2520for%2520Posting.docx%3Futm_source%3Dchatgpt.com&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK.

⁴² Bureau of Land Management, “Beas Lewis Flat Campground, Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-UT-C020-2025-0025-EA,” November 2025, https://planning.blm.gov/public_projects/2039774/200660077/20147237/251047217/DOI-BLM-UT-C020-2025-0025-EA_Environmental%20Assessment.pdf.

⁴³ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

⁴⁴ Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

⁴⁵ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Forest Service.

existing recreation sites for accessibility upgrades and integrating accessibility planning into guidance for recreation investment and project development.⁴⁶

Early field-level projects demonstrate how Title II is beginning to translate into tangible accessibility improvements. In Virginia, BLM's Northeastern States District proposed the Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail, a one-mile loop trail with activity stations, a vault toilet, parking, and interpretive features designed to support individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities.⁴⁷ The project responds to public demand and fills a gap in accessible recreation infrastructure on BLM-managed land near major metropolitan areas.⁴⁸ USFS reports that early accessibility improvements on USFS lands include upgrades to trails and the redevelopment of certain campgrounds.⁴⁹ Finally, through a multi-phase effort involving recreation planners, geospatial staff, and accessibility specialists, BLM has incorporated written and photographic descriptions of accessibility features into more than 100 webpages covering specific campsites, restrooms, docks, parking, trails, signage, and virtual tours.⁵⁰ The agency also updated the National Accessible Recreation Opportunities Map to support the data, transparency, and planning requirements of Title II.⁵¹

Streamlining Permits to Encourage Visitation

DOI and USFS are actively implementing the permitting modernization and streamlining requirements of Title III of EXPLORE, with draft DOI guidance expected in Spring 2026.⁵² DOI's forthcoming guidance will establish four permit categories with nine subcategories, distinguishing between single- and multiple-event uses, large and small groups, and competitive and non-competitive activities, to provide clearer standards for applicants and land managers.⁵³ The guidance will also expand the universe of activities that do not require a permit by applying a nominal-effects threshold, reducing burdens on low-impact uses.⁵⁴ This guidance will also broaden the allowance for "substantially similar" activities, consistent with EXPLORE, to proceed under an existing permit rather than requiring a new authorization.⁵⁵ DOI is additionally updating liability insurance requirements to align with the EXPLORE Act, reducing barriers for small operators and recreational organizations.⁵⁶ In a similar development, NPS has released a centralized reporting tool displaying fee revenue reinvestment, improving transparency and public understanding of how recreation fees support visitor services.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Bureau of Land Management, "Meadowood Sensory Nature Trail, Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-Eastern States-M000-2025-0002-EA," July 2025,

https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/2036345/200659309/20139792/251039772/Meadowood%20Sensory%20Nature%20Trail_EA_Final%20DRAFT_20250714.pdf.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

⁵⁰ Bureau of Land Management, "Recreation for all: improving accessibility information," May 21, 2025, <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2025-05-21/recreation-all-improving-accessibility-information>.

⁵¹ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

⁵² Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Forest Service.

⁵³ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ National Park Service, "Your Fee Dollars at Work," November 21, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/fees-at-work.htm>.

USFS reports parallel progress on its own Title III implementation pathway.⁵⁸ Building on close coordination with outfitters, guides, and non-federal partners, USFS intends to roll out Phase I of its permitting modernization in the spring of 2026 as well.⁵⁹ Phase I will address needs assessments, temporary use permits, fee determination methods, adjustments to allocated visitor-use days, and exculpatory agreement structures, which are all key areas that stakeholders identified as early implementation priorities.⁶⁰ Together, these actions will position the agencies to streamline access for guides, outfitters, educators, and families, while providing more predictable user-facing processes ahead of the Semiquincentennial.

Digitizing Recreation Passes and Lowering Costs for Recreation Passes



2026 America the Beautiful Annual Pass.

Source: Recreation.gov, 2026.

Alongside permitting reforms, DOI and USFS completed the modernization of the America the Beautiful Pass system as directed under the EXPLORE Act, allowing visitors to obtain digital passes for the first time on the recreation.gov website.⁶¹ Over 275,000 America the Beautiful passes have been issued since the digital launch in November 2025.⁶² The new platform supports multiple pass types, including Annual, Non-resident, Military, Senior, Access for citizens and residents with disabilities, and Every Kid Outdoors.⁶³ This platform further enables all visitors to access day-use and entrance fee

coverage across all six federal land management agencies.⁶⁴ Physical passes remain available for those that prefer them, but digital issuance decreases friction in trip planning and facilitates fee transparency and reporting. A complimentary geospatial map now shows where passes are accepted and how to obtain them.⁶⁵

Additionally, the EXPLORE Act extended the Every Kid Outdoors program, allowing all American fourth-graders free access to all federal land management sites in an effort to encourage early access and appreciation for the outdoors and the nation's history.⁶⁶ EXPLORE made minor technical changes to this program to ensure faster and smoother pass delivery to kids. This has proven to be a major success; since EXPLORE's passage, more "than 150,000 fourth graders used their free pass to connect with the outdoors."⁶⁷

⁵⁸ Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ "Buy a Pass," U.S. Federal Government, 2025, <https://www.recreation.gov/pass>.

⁶² Information provided by the U.S. Forest Service.

⁶³ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ "Buy a Pass," U.S. Federal Government, 2025, <https://www.recreation.gov/pass>.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, "ORR Marks One-Year Anniversary of the EXPLORE Act, Highlighting Progress and Opportunity on Access, Innovation, and Implementation of Landmark Outdoor Recreation Legislation," <https://recreationroundtable.org/news/orr-marks-one-year-anniversary-of-the-explore-act-highlighting-progress-and-opportunity-on-access-innovation-and-implementation-of-landmark-outdoor-recreation-legislation/>.

Climbing Guidance Implementation



Climbers using fixed anchors in North Cascades National Park, Washington.

Source: The Mountaineers, 2024.

DOI and USFS are currently drafting guidance to implement Section 122 on recreational climbing.⁶⁸ DOI determined that no Minimum Requirements Analysis will be required for using fixed anchors in wilderness areas, consistent with the EXPLORE Act's recognition of climbing and anchors as appropriate uses when consistent with the Wilderness Act.⁶⁹ DOI further reports that it has been engaged in structured stakeholder consultation with the outdoor recreation and

climbing communities to ensure that its guidance provides clarity, retains safety considerations, and is operable on the ground.⁷⁰ For these reasons, DOI is working to finalize guidance that is both legally durable and consistent with Congressional intent to provide clear, predictable access for climbers.⁷¹

ABPP Improvements to Celebrate America250

Implementation of Section 157 (American Battlefield Protection Program Enhancement) is complete.⁷² NPS finalized statutory updates; expanded eligibility for battlefield assistance to states, Tribes, local governments, educational institutions, and nonprofits; and issued a \$17.4 million funding opportunity with applications accepted on a rolling basis through September 30, 2026, subject to a one-to-one, non-Federal match.⁷³ The first updated Battlefield Reports are expected in November 2026, positioning historic battlefields and their surrounding communities for increased heritage visitation during America250.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Forest Service.

⁶⁹ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ National Park Service, *Battlefield Land Acquisition Grants: Notice of Funding Opportunity P26AS00019*, September 3, 2025, <https://www.grants.gov/search-results-detail/360378>.

⁷⁴ Information provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior.