

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS
REGARDING
EXPLORE AMERICA250: CELEBRATING ONE YEAR OF THE EXPANDING PUBLIC LANDS
OUTDOOR RECREATION EXPERIENCES ACT**

JANUARY 21, 2026 AT 10:15 A.M.

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA), Forest Service, to discuss the "EXPLORE America 250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act" and present the views of the Department. The Department of Agriculture defers to the Department of the Interior for their perspective on the implementation of authorities relevant to the Department of the Interior and its bureaus.

The Department appreciates and applauds President Trump's conservation leadership. The President's vision for continued access for hunters, anglers, and the recreating public began in his first term and continues in his second. President Trump's emphasis remains focused on serving our veterans—especially disabled veterans—and the public at large by taking clear and decisive action to ensure that all Americans can access and enjoy the splendor of our public lands. This commitment is further demonstrated by Executive Order 14313 *Establishing the President's Make America Beautiful Again Commission* which ensures America continues to preserve its natural beauty and expand outdoor recreation opportunities for future generations.

Visitation to national forests and grasslands has grown substantially over the last five years – from approximately 150 million to more than 160 million annual visits – as Americans re-discovered the outdoors during the pandemic. In Fiscal Year 2023, these visits supported 167,000 jobs and contributed \$16.2 billion in gross domestic product. However, these visitation trends also create additional user impacts on our public lands and facilities.

In total, the Forest Service currently administers more than 368,000 miles of roads, 6,700 bridges, 165,000 miles of trails, 7,400 trail bridges, 1,500 dams and reservoirs, 1,391 communications sites administered by the Special Uses Program, 30,000 recreation sites, nearly 4,700 drinking water and 4,700 wastewater systems, and 39,000 buildings.

The Forest Service is also working to safeguard and promote access for hunting, fishing, and other recreational uses of National Forest System lands. A significant amount of this work is possible through the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund Act, which was signed into law by President Trump in 2020. In FY 2025 the Forest Service completed 87

deferred maintenance projects through the Legacy Restoration Fund—improving 64 recreation sites and repairing 36 roads and bridges. As of January 2026, the agency has completed a total of 477 infrastructure projects to improve public access while resolving more than \$240 million in deferred maintenance. Approximately 200 of these projects have improved the agency’s transportation system, providing access for active management, firefighting, recreation activities, and serving as critical transportation corridors for rural communities. There are 750 additional projects underway. Once completed, these projects will have addressed more than \$1 billion in deferred maintenance. While there has been significant progress in reducing the agency’s maintenance backlog, more critical work remains. Reauthorizing the Great American Outdoors Act—originally signed by President Trump in his first term—would represent a critical commitment to the President’s vision for conservation in America.

Building on the success of the Great American Outdoors Act, the EXPLORE Act has improved recreation opportunities and facilitated greater access to Federal public land. Public Law 118-234 facilitates more public recreation on Federal lands, connects with gateway communities, significantly enhances access, streamlines permitting, and includes a suite of additional improvements. Under President Trump’s leadership and Secretary Rollins’ direction, the Forest Service has implemented the EXPLORE Act in communities across our great country.

TITLE I—OUTDOOR RECREATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Crucially, Section 113 of the EXPLORE Act established a permanent charter for the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation. As the sponsoring agency through 2028, the Forest Service has established a vision for stewarding the council and for providing meaningful and regular updates to Congress.

Section 123 of the EXPLORE Act charged the Forest Service with ensuring operational target ranges across the country, providing access for target shooters across the country. The Forest Service has 122 existing, operational target ranges, with 93 ranges across 35 units fully complying with the law. Furthermore, 74 units have general forest plan alignment for establishing additional ranges, positioning the agency to potentially expand recreational shooting opportunities in alignment with agency plans as overseen by local line officers.

Biking on long-distance trails is another priority for the Forest Service established by Section 121 of the EXPLORE Act. The agency has begun work in earnest and has identified 16 proposed routes that are each over 80 miles long using existing, primarily dirt or natural surface trails. Across the agency field level survey work has continued to look for additional opportunities alongside the critical coordination work with colleagues at the Department of the Interior.

The Forest Service was also tasked with updating a number of agency policies in the EXPLORE Act. For example, in Section 122 the agency is well underway in working towards the statutory deadline for establishing policy related to fixed anchors in congressionally designated wilderness.

Section 124 of the EXPLORE Act requires the Forest Service to re-establish overnight camping opportunities at Albert Pike Recreation Area on the Ouachita National Forest. To date, all

potential sites suitable for overnight camping have been identified. Day use has been re-established in all the areas specified in this section. The Ouachita National Forest has begun design work for campsites outside of the floodplain and will pursue that work with available funding.

Pursuant to Section 125 of the Act, the Forest Service has undertaken the rulemaking process to publish technical changes to its existing permitting regulations based exclusively on Title 16 United States Code 460l-6d: Filming and still photography. The agency expects to publish these rules during the first quarter of calendar 2026, and in furtherance of that goal has prepared national training and standardized forms for full implementation of the requirements in this section of the EXPLORE Act. Finally, the Forest Service coordinates regularly with counterparts at the Department of the Interior to ensure the public is not confused as different agencies implement nationwide policy.

TITLE II—ACCESS AMERICA

Under Title II, Subtitle A of the EXPLORE Act, the Forest Service was directed to identify accessible trails and accessible recreation opportunities across all regions under Sections 214 and 215. The agency met the January 4, 2026 deadline via internal surveys and coordination with the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, alongside external partners. Efforts focused on the identification and prioritization of recreation sites for accessibility upgrades and the integration of accessibility planning into recreation investments across the spectrum of users. Improvements include trail upgrades, campground redevelopments, and water access improvements. This work is foundational for the implementation of Section 213, which directs agencies to develop a pilot program with stakeholder engagement to improve priority trails for accessibility by January 4, 2027.

Subtitle B of Title II tasks the Forest Service with a suite of responsibilities to ensure the agency makes outdoor recreation opportunities and jobs available to our veterans. In its implementation of Section 222, the Forest Service has identified an existing expert within the ranks of our Washington Office Recreation staff—an Army veteran—to serve as our Military Veterans Outdoor Recreation Liaison. The agency liaison has established relationships and partnerships with representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of War, and serves as a sub-group lead on the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation to establish the newly formed Military and Veterans subgroup and is also developing a National Strategy for Military and Veteran Recreation on Federal Lands and Waters.

TITLE III—SOAR ACT

One of the most public-facing accomplishments of the implementation of the EXPLORE Act is the digitization of the America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Lands Pass, pursuant to Section 322. All Americans are now able to enjoy this discount program through the convenience of their mobile devices. Over 275,000 passes have been sold or issued since the soft launch in November 2025 through the first week of January 2026, generating over \$7.2 million in recreation fee revenue to be used by the participating agencies to support recreation programs for the public.

Title III of the EXPLORE Act directs the agency to modernize recreation permitting on National Forest System lands. The agency coordinated with key external stakeholders to prioritize the most important implementation steps, and to coordinate with users on the development of a phased implementation schedule. The first phase of required permitting changes is scheduled for implementation in the spring of 2026. These changes will reflect priorities identified by stakeholders including needs assessments, temporary use permits, fee determination methods, adjustments to allocated visitor-use days, and exculpatory agreements.

A critical authority expansion in the EXPLORE Act, was the expansion of the Good Neighbor Authority in Section 351 of the Act, which importantly extended the authority for Tribes and Counties to sell federal timber and retain funds as revenue, allowing retained revenue to be used for recreation services in addition to restoration services, and allowing those restoration services to occur on and off federal land. Swiftly after the Act's passage, the agency identified 14 initial early adopter Forests to pilot these new GNA authorities. The Nez Perce Tribe became the first tribe to harvest federal timber using these new authorities. In western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and parts of Virginia the new authority was used extensively in the wake of the destruction of Hurricane Helene. A noteworthy example includes the reconstruction of the Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail that serves as an economic driver for southwest Virginia. Ten new Good Neighbor agreements now include recreation services across the country. Federal timber sales are always at the nexus of good neighbor authority, and the Forest Service is committed to implementing the EXPLORE Act alongside Executive Order 14225, titled *Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production*.

CONCLUSION

The Forest Service provides countless opportunities for the public to connect with the outdoors by recreating on National Forests and Grasslands. Access is important for so many reasons including community well-being and economic opportunity. USDA appreciates the recognition by this Subcommittee of the importance of recreation on Federal lands to our national economy, as well as the sustained interest in finding solutions to recreation management challenges. We understand these challenges, and we know we can further enhance recreation opportunities on Federal lands. We are building our national strategy and action plan, called Reimagine Recreation, by engaging with a broad collection of stakeholders, partners and service providers to develop a national recreation action plan that sets clear priorities for the agency and identifies the conditions and pathways to get us there. The Reimagine Recreation effort is built on a Forest Service-, community-, and partner-driven collaborative planning effort aimed at coalescing shared interests and maximizing the greatest good. In short, it emphasizes investing in the recreation profession and working in concert across the landscape with our fellow land-management agencies and providers to collectively provide the greatest suite of opportunities possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on EXPLORE America 250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act. I look forward to continuing to work with the committee as implementation of the law continues apace.