



Testimony of Jason Curry, Director - Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation - Department of Natural Resources

January 21, 2026, oversight hearing, “EXPLORE America250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act”

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and committee members, my name is Jason Curry and I am the Director of the Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation. I’m grateful for this opportunity and for the work of this committee. Notably, two Utah members; Congressman Kennedy, and my own congresswoman, Celeste Maloy.

We’re reflecting on the EXPLORE Act and I want to express gratitude on behalf of the State of Utah where more than two-thirds of our land mass is federally managed. Passage was lauded widely throughout all facets of outdoor recreation. We’re proud as a community to see a bill of this size and complexity pass unanimously. It was a welcome victory then and a valuable lesson in today’s world to point to congress’s ability to make a piece of legislation with multiple detailed sections succeed, so again, thank you. Outdoor recreation is nonpartisan.

13 years ago, Utah formed the Office of Outdoor Recreation. Since then, 23 other states have done the same in an effort to grow the outdoor recreation economy and advocate for outdoor recreation policy in their states. Collectively, and on a national level, these states have formed a coalition (the Confluence of States) to elevate outdoor recreation as not only a significant piece of the economy, but as a substantial source of health and well-being. Not just because outdoor recreation is enjoyable as a leisure activity, but because it’s an essential connection to the natural world and our creator.

Full implementation of the EXPLORE Act means greater access to outdoor recreation and study after study shows that when an individual engages in outdoor recreation, there is a bottom-line reduction in their healthcare burden. Cardiovascular disease, type2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases are reduced. Imagine what that’s doing for our nation’s overall healthcare costs. Each time a parent makes time to take their children into the outdoors, it’s less likely that they will be anxious, depressed, or suicidal (and that includes the parents). One study in particular concluded that being outdoors for children with ADHD resulted in improvements to their ability to focus and learn that was comparable to the

peak effects of ritalin. I invite you to find other similar scholarly articles and research studies that suggest that for some, outdoor recreation can be as effective as medicine and counselling when it comes to mental health outcomes. None of these studies suggest that clinical mental health treatment is not needed, but that time outdoors is a valid healthcare intervention.

If the agencies directed in the EXPLORE Act continue to carry out the various directives to enhance visitor experiences and increase access to public land, we'll have fewer people living and focusing in the digital world, more overall health and well-being, and hopefully more rational conversations around the common grounds that are found in the outdoors. For our veterans, young people, disabled users, aging population, and low income communities, the need for access to outdoor spaces has never been greater. There are specific provisions in the act that address each of those groups specifically.

The many provisions in EXPLORE that direct federal land management agencies to coordinate and consult with state and local governments has been a source of excitement and optimism for rural Utah, where nearly every city and town borders with federal lands. We've already seen some promising signs, including secretary's orders from the Department of the Interior on things like local coordination with gateway communities, and a general order to implement the various provisions in the act. I'm hopeful that a secretary's order will be issued by the secretary of agriculture as well. We're grateful for the work being done by our partners and states are prepared to be a force multiplier to deliver EXPLORE Act results alongside our federal partners. I counted 16 instances or sections where a key part of the section is that the federal agencies "may or shall" coordinate, cooperate, or collaborate with state and local governments. The ethic of shared stewardship of public lands is found throughout the various sections, and we're counting on those agencies, especially the folks on the ground to recognize that and take it seriously.

Thank you for the opportunity today. Utah, along with other states, is hopeful that the agencies concerned will continue with policy directives that explicitly clarify that full implementation of the EXPLORE Act is a core agency priority.