

# OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

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

Dear Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Subcommittee members:

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the implementation and one-year anniversary of the EXPLORE Act.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of nine member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

Prior to the EXPLORE Act being signed into law in January 2025, the outdoor recreation community worked alongside a long and bipartisan list of champions to cultivate the ideas included in EXPLORE for more than 10 years. Among many provisions, the EXPLORE Act facilitates long-distance bike trails, improves permitting for facilitated outdoor access, protects Wilderness climbing, improves agency collaboration and data collection on recreational use, and supports improved outdoor recreation access for veterans and armed service members, and our community is grateful to be celebrating the one-year anniversary of the law's passage.

Outdoor Alliance and the outdoor recreation community are grateful to a long list of congressional champions, staff, and partners for this work. For us, the road to a comprehensive recreation package began more than a decade ago with our work with then-House Natural Resource Chairman Rob Bishop and Sen. Wyden on their Recreation Not Red-Tape Act. We are particularly grateful for the work of Chairman



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Westerman, former Committee Chair and Ranking Member, the late Rep. Grijalva, and Subcommittee Chair and Ranking Member Reps. Tiffany and Neguse, and we are also grateful for the opportunity to work with Ranking Member Huffman on the EXPLORE Act's implementation.

The passage of the EXPLORE Act marked the first comprehensive update to federal recreation policy in decades. Congress's attention to this issue reflects both growing participation in outdoor recreation activities and growing recognition of outdoor recreation's economic importance. A record 181.1 million Americans participated in outdoor recreation activities in 2024, with many of these experiences occurring on federal public lands.<sup>1</sup> Current data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis shows that outdoor recreation contributed \$1.2 trillion to America's economy, supported nearly 5 million jobs, and accounted for 2.3% of U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2023.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these economic benefits, research shows that outdoor recreation also provides a significant return on investment, with recreation contributing nearly 14 times more to the GDP than what it receives from federal spending.<sup>3</sup> As it is implemented, the EXPLORE Act will enhance and expand these outdoor experiences and economic benefits.

## Implementation

Outdoor Alliance is grateful that EXPLORE implementation has been a priority for the administration at both the Department of Interior and the USDA Forest Service. As we describe below, agencies have made progress on many of the EXPLORE sections our community is most enthusiastic about, and in many cases Outdoor Alliance and its member organizations have been working in collaboration with agencies to support implementation efforts.

At the same time, implementation has been challenged by drastic reductions in agency staffing and efforts to reorganize federal land management agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> 2025 Outdoor Participation Trends Report Executive Summary, Outdoor Industry Association (2024).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 24-53, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023 (2024).

<sup>3</sup> Recreation Funding in America: Current Results and Future Insights, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (2024).



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Publicly-available data from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management shows that the Department of Interior has lost more than 9,000 staff since the beginning of FY25, while the USDA Forest Service has lost more than 8,500 over that same time period.<sup>4</sup> From our interactions with federal agencies over the past year and the experiences of our community on the ground, we know that these staff reductions have severely affected recreation and recreation-related positions, particularly at the national or regional levels—precisely those most qualified to implement major policy initiatives like the EXPLORE Act.

The result of these staff reductions is that, despite their best efforts and intentions, federal land management agencies lack the resources needed to ensure that the on-the-ground improvements to outdoor recreation access envisioned by the EXPLORE Act are realized. Even more to the point, the goal of the EXPLORE Act is to improve access to high quality outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands and waters; even if the Act itself is fully implemented, its benefits risk being subsumed by the broader negative effects of agency staffing reductions.

We are pleased to see Congress's bipartisan support for public lands and waters and outdoor recreation manifest in the passage last week of FY26 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations, and we hope that this will help to foster greater stability at the agencies charged with EXPLORE's implementation and the stewardship of public lands and waters. We recommend that Congress pursue dedicated funding for EXPLORE implementation through FY27 appropriations, and we offer our support in envisioning and advancing such an effort. We also encourage this Committee to expeditiously work towards renewing and expanding funding for the National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund to ensure that agencies continue to have capacity to address deferred maintenance on public lands.

Outdoor Alliance and our member organizations have worked on implementation of specific sections of EXPLORE. Our perspectives on those sections' implementation follows.

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<sup>4</sup> Data calculated using the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Workforce Changes tool, available at <https://data.opm.gov/explore-data/analytics/workforce-changes>.



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## *Section 112, Identifying Opportunities for Outdoor Recreation*

Section 112 of the EXPLORE Act tasks land managers with developing and updating an inventory and assessment of recreational resources with support from public comment. This section is intended to increase land managers' understanding of the diversity, locations, and qualities of outdoor recreation resources on public lands and to ensure that federal land management decisions are informed by a specific and granular understanding of a particular landscape's recreation values.

Outdoor Alliance and our member organizations' experience has often been that unless a particular land manager holds a personal enthusiasm for and interest in outdoor recreation—maybe even a specific activity—local staff may not be aware of the full range of recreation values that exist on a particular land management unit. This is particularly true for more specialized activities like those represented by Outdoor Alliance member organizations. The recreation inventory required by Section 112 is intended to help land managers gain a better understanding of these recreation sites—along with better-known sites like trails and campgrounds—so that land management decisions can be better tailored to protect and enhance outdoor recreation values.

Outdoor Alliance is in regular contact with Forest Service staff and the University of Montana on their work to develop an implementation strategy for this section, and we are extremely pleased by the early contours of this work.

## *Sections 132 and 133, Improved Recreation Visitation Data and Monitoring for Improved Recreation Decision Making*

Sections 132 and 133 of the EXPLORE Act direct agencies to cultivate improved recreation visitation data, including developing pilot programs to provide real-time visitation numbers and improve visitation information for low-use and dispersed recreation sites. If implemented effectively, these sections hold potential to greatly improve both agencies' and the public's understanding of the location and amount of recreational visits occurring on public lands. Our hope is that the methodology developed for this section can eventually be scaled up to support more precise visitor use data at the national level. Ideally, this data will play an important role in informing land management decisions, recreation planning, and funding decisions.



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Outdoor Alliance has been in regular contact with the team at the University of Washington working to develop methodologies for these programs and has helped to broker introductions with potential data partners for these efforts. We are enthusiastic about the process thus far and keen to continue supporting land managers and outside partners in the cultivation and use of this data.

## *Section 122, Protecting America's Rock Climbing*

Section 122 expresses the clear intent of Congress that climbing, including the use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors, is an appropriate use of public land, including in designated Wilderness areas. This section also tasks agencies with developing guidance for managing rock climbing on federal public lands, including Wilderness.

We are currently awaiting the release of the guidance required by the EXPLORE Act, which is due by summer 2026. It is our hope that the proposed guidance—which must come with an opportunity for public comment—will adhere to the intent of the EXPLORE Act and not attempt to define fixed anchors as prohibited “installations” under the Wilderness Act or subject the use of fixed anchors to the “Minimum Requirements Analysis” (MRA) process, which is applied to uses that are otherwise fundamentally prohibited under the Wilderness Act.

We are somewhat concerned that the agencies have not conducted outreach to stakeholders in the climbing community regarding the updated guidance or reconvened the climbing management working group that provided stakeholder input on fixed anchor management from 2017 to 2019. We are concerned that, without this necessary outreach, the updated guidance will repeat some of the mistakes of the 2023 draft guidance released by the Department of Interior and USDA Forest Service, which created a confusing and unworkable permitting system for fixed anchor management. Outdoor Alliance and our member organizations and partners in the climbing community offer our support and collaboration in creating guidance that simultaneously protects climbing opportunities and Wilderness character.



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## *Section 121, Biking on Long-Distance Trails*

The Biking on Long Distance Trails section of the EXPLORE Act was developed with a wide range of stakeholders, including the offroad bicycle community, the broader outdoor recreation community, and conservation advocates. The BOLT Act directs the land management agencies to identify existing and potential long distance trails and develop a marketing plan and signage to promote these trails to the public.

Beginning in early 2025, Outdoor Alliance's member organization the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) led a group of offroad bicycling organizations to begin the process of collecting data on long distance trails. As part of that effort, IMBA solicited nominations from hundreds of trail based organizations for trails they would like to see in a comprehensive inventory of long-distance trails. The response was substantial, and during this period IMBA has communicated regularly with land managers to share data in support of the report listing long distance trails due in July of 2026.

## *Section 127, Motorized and Nonmotorized Access*

Section 127 of the EXPLORE Act directs agencies to publish and make available ground transportation linear feature maps (BLM), motor vehicle use maps (Forest Service), and over-snow vehicle use maps (Forest Service and BLM). We are extremely concerned about the implementation of this section given the stated intention of the USDA Forest Service to begin the process of repealing its travel management regulations.

The Travel Management Rule (TMR) gives land managers a framework for determining where motorized vehicles can be operated within National Forests. It is designed to maintain recreational and commercial access, while preventing excessive erosion, water pollution, and impacts to fish and wildlife habitat. The TMR protects public access to National Forests by providing certainty over where, when, and what types of motor vehicle uses are allowed. It allows for quality experiences for different types of outdoor recreationists by designating areas and routes for motorized recreation and emphasizing other places for human-powered recreation. Travel Management helps to alleviate user conflict and support a full range of high-quality recreation experiences.





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The genesis of Section 127 of EXPLORE was a desire to push the Forest Service, in particular, to proceed more briskly in creating winter travel management plans for Forests that have not previously gone through the winter travel planning process and to make information on access for motorized recreation and other use more accessible for users. This section specifically uses the terms of art for the outputs of the travel management process in order to make clear to agencies that this section is a prompt to prioritize travel management, not an invitation to look for shortcuts to this process. The stated intention of the Forest Service to repeal its travel management regulations is at odds with the clear intent of the EXPLORE Act.

## *Title III, Simplifying Access for Outdoor Recreation*

Title III of the EXPLORE Act is intended to improve the special use recreational permitting systems of the land management agencies. Streamlining these inefficient and dated systems will enable more people to experience public lands through facilitated access providers like a volunteer-based club, an outfitter or guide, or a university outdoor program.

As with other sections of the EXPLORE Act, implementation of Title III has been hampered by agency staffing reductions. Implementation has also been uneven between agencies. However, we are cautiously optimistic about early progress from the Forest Service and BLM and expect to see a first round of directives and implementation guidance to be released within the next few months. We also appreciate that the National Park Service has made progress in implementing Section 319(c) of the EXPLORE Act, which would allow outfitter guides to use liability waivers for their activities.

Congress can help streamline implementation by passing technical amendments to Title III of the EXPLORE Act. Minor technical amendments are necessary to clarify wording, improve readability, and insert new language to elucidate necessary provisions.



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## Technical Amendments

Prior to the EXPLORE Act passing the Senate in December 2024, House Natural Resources Committee leadership worked in close partnership with the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee, as well as with technical guidance from the federal land management agencies, on technical changes to a number of sections of the bill. These negotiated changes addressed a wide range of issues related to implementation of the Act, particularly relating to Title III, the SOAR Act. The 118th Congress ran out of time to pass the negotiated version of the bill, and the Senate instead passed the House version of EXPLORE without these technical changes, but with an agreement to revisit the bill via an amendments package in the 119th Congress.

Outdoor Alliance encourages the Committee to work to advance an EXPLORE amendments package based on the technical changes negotiated in the 118th Congress. These refinements could help to simplify EXPLORE implementation for federal land management agencies for a number of sections of the bill and would help agencies more easily meet the bill's intent of enhancing recreation access. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee in support of EXPLORE amendments.

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On behalf of the outdoor recreation community, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee about the successes and challenges of EXPLORE Act implementation. We are extremely grateful for the longstanding spirit of bipartisanship and pragmatism with which Congress has approached the work of improving outdoor recreation opportunities and access for our country's public lands and waters. We look forward to continuing to work together towards successful EXPLORE Act implementation.

Best regards,



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