



January 19, 2026

The Honorable Tom Tiffany
Chair
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Joe Neguse
Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Matt Wade, and I am the Executive Director of the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA). On behalf of the AMGA, I respectfully submit this testimony for inclusion in the public record regarding the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Federal Lands, Oversight Hearing Titled “EXPLORE America250: Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act” to be held on January 21, 2026, in 1324 Longworth House Office Building.

The American Mountain Guides Association provides training and certification for climbing instructors, mountain guides, and backcountry skiing guides across the United States. Founded in 1979, the AMGA has trained over 15,000 climbing and skiing guides who provide outdoor experiences for the public on public lands. Of additional relevance to today’s hearing, our membership includes outfitters and guides who have been operating within the modern commercial recreation permitting system since its inception. We have extensive practical experience with the permitting process, visitor-use day allocations, fee administration, compliance reporting, and climbing management, including fixed-anchor issues. We appreciate the opportunity to share our experience and perspective.

We will begin with comments on Title III—the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act (SOAR Act). AMGA was involved in the development of this section, which traces back nearly 15 years to early conversations about outfitter-guide permitting reform. Those conversations stemmed from real issues that were preventing guides from providing the public with outdoor experiences on public lands. It wasn’t uncommon for a guide to contact a land agency to apply for a permit, only to be told, “We aren’t issuing any permits right now, can you come back in a few years?” Since that time, we have identified the roadblocks that have limited access to public lands for guided recreation, and the strategies contained in Title III of the EXPLORE Act have been developed to overcome those roadblocks. These essential reforms will ensure people from all walks of life have the opportunity to visit America’s public lands with the skilled and

compassionate leadership of expert outfitters and guides. After decades spent working in an onerous and outdated system, it is deeply gratifying to be on the doorstep of changes that will enhance recreational access to public lands, increase agency efficiency, and support the livelihoods of outfitters and guides. We are truly on the cusp of a new era, and we thank the Committee for your diligence and perseverance in enacting the improvements contained in Title III.

We would also like to express gratitude to the teams at the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service who have already begun the work of implementation. They have been actively aligning their systems and procedures with the streamlining goals outlined in the EXPLORE Act. In doing so, they have cultivated communication with AMGA and other stakeholders to understand intent, share ideas, and promote open dialogue. We believe this collaboration is essential to real-world success in the field. Thank you Forest Service, BLM, and National Park Service.

While there is much progress to be thankful for and there is reason to be optimistic about the future, there are also critical steps that must be taken to ensure efficiencies in outfitter-guide permitting are fully realized.

Full Agency Staffing is Essential for Implementation

Land agencies must have sufficient staff capacity. Implementing Title III will require significant effort to develop new permit types and fee structures, design and deploy online application and reporting systems, and coordinate the creation of new multijurisdictional permits. These new tools and procedures must then be communicated to the field through carefully crafted guidance and many hours of training. Finally, permit administrators must convert every existing outfitter-guide permit into an EXPLORE Act compliant format. This will be an all-hands-on-deck undertaking that will necessitate full staffing at all levels of the chain of command, from policy and program teams, to permit administrators in the field. We ask Congress to work with the agencies to ensure agency resources are applied where needed to effectuate a successful implementation.

Balancing Prompt Implementation with Public Involvement

With over 50 pages of legislative text, enacting over a dozen significant reforms, Title III of the EXPLORE Act is complex. AMGA has full confidence in the agencies to implement the bill as intended, and yet, there is always the possibility that newly created systems do not align with real-world scenarios in the field. It will be important for the land agencies to invite feedback from guides and the recreating public to ensure implementation achieves desired outcomes.

To balance prompt implementation with public involvement, AMGA supports the agencies' use of interim directives or interim guidance. Advancing new procedures through interim guidance can accelerate learning by allowing field staff to apply new approaches and generate practical feedback in real time. But once interim guidance has undergone preliminary testing, it should be made available for public comment through a traditional notice and comment process before

becoming final. This will promote transparency, ensure all stakeholders can provide input, and ensure final directives are informed, workable, and aligned with Congressional intent.

EXPLORE Act Title III Requires Technical Corrections

To minimize confusion and ensure a smooth implementation process, assistance from Congress is needed to enact a series of technical corrections to Title III of the EXPLORE Act. When the EXPLORE Act was passed by the U.S. Congress on December 19, 2024, it was enacted under urgent circumstances that precluded the inclusion of known technical corrections. These technical corrections were developed in detail during the summer of 2024 with full support from the stakeholder community and broad, bipartisan support in the House Natural Resources Committee and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. A representative sample of the corrections is presented below.

- In *Section 316, Temporary Permits*, a fix is needed to clarify that a temporary permit can be converted to a long-term permit after two years of satisfactory performance under either a single permit or multiple permits.
- In *Section 311, Special Recreation Permit and Fee*, technical corrections are needed to ensure land agencies can update a predetermined fee when necessary, and properly account for permit holder deductions.
- In *Section 311, Special Recreation Permit and Fee*, the permit described at (13)(A)(ii), for a “large group activity or event,” requires an adjustment to provide agencies with the discretion to determine the group size threshold that must be met for a permit to be required.
- In *Section 311, Special Recreation Permit and Fee*, additional language is needed to clarify nothing in the section affects the ability of the Secretary to issue permits or collect fees under the National Forest Organizational Camp Fee Improvement Act of 2003 (16 U.S.C. 6231 et seq.).

Making these changes, and other minor technical fixes, will eliminate confusion in the field and support a smooth implementation process for both agency staff and permit holders. In addition, as the implementation process unfolds, there may be a need for further refinements once agency staff and the public experience the effect of the new law. AMGA stands ready to assist Congress in the development of technical corrections to ensure the EXPLORE Act Title III is achieving intended outcomes.

PARC Act Implementation: Public Engagement and Staffing

AMGA also urges the Committee to maintain oversight of Title I, Section 122—the Protecting America’s Rock Climbing Act (PARC Act). AMGA supports the PARC Act because it provides needed clarity and consistency for climbing management, including fixed anchors, and helps preserve safe access to established recreational climbing routes while maintaining agency authority to protect wilderness character and resources. Here again, successful implementation will depend upon proactive public engagement and adequate agency staffing.

The development of agency guidance should lean heavily on public engagement, including input from guides and the recreating public who depend on fixed anchors. AMGA encourages guidance that clearly allows for the use and maintenance of fixed anchors in wilderness, and which requires either programmatic or site-specific authorization for the placement of new fixed anchors. Maintenance of existing fixed anchors should be allowed without prior authorization when advance communication is impractical and a safety concern is imminent. For example, if a guide arrives at a fixed anchor deep in the wilderness and finds it to be in a state of disrepair, it is essential for the guide to perform an immediate repair of the anchor to ensure their safety and that of their clients.

It will be critical for agencies to have adequate staffing and resources to produce climbing management guidance that is informed by public involvement, workable in the field, and aligned with Congressional intent. Once guidance is established, extensive staff capacity will continue to be needed to train field staff who will administer the guidance and carry out climbing management into the future.

Conclusion

On behalf of the American Mountain Guides Association and our members nationwide, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. AMGA looks forward to working with the Committee and the agencies to ensure the EXPLORE Act Title III fulfills Congress's intent to improve access for guided recreational opportunities on America's public lands, and EXPLORE Act Title I, Section 122, fulfills Congress's intent to establish guidance for the management of climbing in designated wilderness that allows for recreational climbing and the placement, use, and maintenance of climbing fixed anchors.

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Sincerely,



Matt Wade
Executive Director
American Mountain Guides Association