



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, April 20, 2026
Subject: Oversight Hearing on “*EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at Our National Parks and Public Lands*”

The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will hold an oversight hearing on “*EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at Our National Parks and Public Lands.*”

The hearing will take place on **Wednesday, April 22, 2026, at 10:00 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, April 21, 2026, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- Title II of the EXPLORE Act, known as “Access America,” established a first-of-its-kind framework to make outdoor recreation on federal lands more accessible, navigable, and inclusive for all Americans, particularly individuals with disabilities, wounded veterans, and their families.
- The need for accessible recreation is clear, and successful models already exist across the country, demonstrating that targeted innovations in infrastructure, information, and assistive technologies can transform how individuals with disabilities access and explore national parks and public lands.
- Early EXPLORE Act implementation efforts across federal agencies show progress in planning, community engagement, interagency coordination, and data collection. These efforts have laid a successful foundation for further measurable and scalable improvements that will continue expanding access across federal lands.
- Despite this progress, outdated and arcane federal regulations still create confusion and needlessly block access, revealing the need for additional updates and reforms.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Outside Experts)

- **Mr. Joe Stone**, Co-Owner, Dovetail Trail Consulting, Jackson, WY

- **Ms. Julie Howell**, Associate Legislative Director for Government Relations, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Washington, D.C.
- **Ms. Maureen Elias**, Deputy Director of Government Affairs – Veterans, Wounded Warrior Project, Washington, D.C.
- **Mr. Mike Passo**, Executive Director, American Trails, Marshfield, WI [*Minority Witness*]

III. BACKGROUND

Expanding Access to America

National parks and public lands are critical to ensuring that Americans across the country have affordable access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Yet many national parks and public lands remain largely inaccessible to individuals with disabilities.¹ In fact, the National Park Service (NPS) found that:

In the more than 400 national park units across the country, there are visitor centers without accessible restrooms, water fountains, and entrances. Paths between parking lots, sidewalks, buildings, and interpretative programs are not accessible for some visitors who are mobility impaired. Many recreational assets, such as trails, beaches, and campgrounds, lack inclusive opportunities that would broaden the spectrum of visitors able to enjoy these unique experiences.²

The presence of these accessibility barriers is no trivial matter; approximately one in four Americans has a disability, with roughly half of that population having a disability that affects their mobility.³ As visitation to federal lands increases, so too does the demand for more accessible recreation opportunities and better information about accessibility.⁴

The EXPLORE Act’s Improvements to Accessible Recreation Infrastructure

In response to this issue, Title II of the EXPLORE Act, known as “Access America,” modernized outdoor recreation policy to ensure that federal lands are more accessible, navigable, and usable for all Americans.⁵ Title II removed long-standing barriers that had limited access to national parks and public lands for individuals with disabilities, veterans, military servicemembers, Gold Star Families, and children. In particular, Title II created new accessible trails and outdoor recreation opportunities, bolstered the quality of recreational information

¹ *All In!: Accessibility in the National Park Service, 2015-2020*, National Park Service, August, 29, 2014, https://material-civet.files.svcdcdn.com/production/images/documents/All_In_Accessibility_in_the_NPS_2015-2020_FINAL.pdf?dm=1620062860.

² *Id.*

³ Alissa Greenberg, “Adapting national parks for wheelchair hiking,” PBS, April 12, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/disability-hiking-national-parks-accessibility/>; Szu-Ching Shen, et al., *Incidence, risk, and associated factors of depression in adults with physical and sensory disabilities: A nationwide population-based study*, National Institute of Health, March 31, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5376337/>; The Mental Health of People with Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 30, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/mental-health-for-all.html>.

⁴ Sarah Grothjan, “Our National Parks: How Accessible Are They?,” Recreational Equipment, Inc., September 21, 2022, <https://www.rei.com/blog/stewardship/national-parks-accessibility>.

⁵ Pub. L. No. 118-234.

available to individuals with disabilities, and incentivized partnerships to improve access for them.



A visitor using a Mountain Trike enjoying the Lower Emerald Pools Trail in Zion National Park. **Source:** National Park Service, 2025.

The EXPLORE Act included several provisions to fill long-standing gaps in information quality and quantity that had limited access to federal lands for people with disabilities. While guidelines under the Architectural Barriers Act of 1969 (ABA) required outdoor recreation spaces, such as campgrounds and trails, to display accessibility information, in practice, this applied only to newly constructed trails.⁶ Existing trails thus lacked sufficient information about accessibility

features, such as width, surface, slope, and obstacles. In fact, a former NPS accessibility specialist remarked that many NPS “trails haven’t been measured probably since the beginning of time.”⁷ Even if a park unit contained accessible recreation opportunities, it would still require “an insurmountable amount of work to find information on a park’s website” about such infrastructure.⁸ Title II responded to these challenges by creating a more intentional and user-focused framework for accessibility across federal lands. The EXPLORE Act gave concrete directives to federal land management agencies to conduct comprehensive assessments of outdoor recreation facilities and high-priority trails, including detailed measurements of conditions, which the agencies must make publicly available on official websites and in signage. These directives built upon the existing ABA guidelines, providing agencies with a consistent baseline for planning and implementation and ensuring that more high-visitation trails and recreation infrastructure would include clear, objective, and consistent accessibility information. By improving the availability and objectivity of this information, the EXPLORE Act enables individuals with disabilities to make safer, more informed decisions about when and where to recreate.

Moreover, Title II of the EXPLORE Act turned this information into action. It required the NPS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop new accessible trails and recreation opportunities throughout their respective regions. Title II required each of those agencies to develop at least three new

⁶ A Rule by the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, “Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines; Outdoor Developed Areas, September 26, 2013, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2013/09/26/2013-22876/architectural-barriers-act-accessibility-guidelines-outdoor-developed-areas>.

⁷ Alissa Greenberg, “Adapting national parks for wheelchair hiking,” PBS, April 12, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/disability-hiking-national-parks-accessibility/>.

⁸ Sarah Grothjan, “Our National Parks: How Accessible Are They?,” Recreational Equipment, Inc., September 21, 2022, <https://www.rei.com/blog/stewardship/national-parks-accessibility>.

accessible trails in every region they manage within the seven years following enactment. The legislation allowed agencies to accomplish this by building new trails or modifying existing trails to make them more accessible. Importantly, the EXPLORE Act also directed agencies to take a holistic approach to accessibility, ensuring that infrastructure supporting the trail (e.g., parking lots and restrooms) also has accessibility features. Additionally, Section 215 of Title II required federal land management agencies to develop at least two new accessible recreation opportunities in each region they manage. This could be satisfied by making existing opportunities, such as hunting, fishing, shooting, camping, skiing, kayaking, biking, or rock climbing, more accessible. To accomplish this, Title II established a pilot program to support partnerships that can help measure trails, develop accessible routes, and make targeted modifications to existing infrastructure. The law further authorized agencies to partner with public and private entities to provide assistive technologies on federal lands, recognizing that access can be expanded not only through construction, but also through technology and partnerships.

Year One of EXPLORE Act Implementation

During the first year implementing Title II, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) emphasized two primary implementation goals: 1) improving the quality and availability of accessibility information through plain-language descriptions and visual resources, and 2) identifying and expanding the number of accessible recreation opportunities available to visitors.⁹ Early actions included ongoing assessments of high-priority trails and recreation sites, informed by collaboration with 120 accessibility-focused partner organizations across 37 states.¹⁰ In their nationwide survey on the EXPLORE Act's Title II implementation, these organizations identified 145 high-priority accessibility projects across the nation, including 25 shovel-ready projects that each serve more than 500 visitors annually.¹¹



Adaptive Mountain Biking near Bend, Oregon. **Source:** Oregon Adaptive Sports, 2023.

As part of this effort, DOI is closely coordinating with affected communities to implement a broader strategy that targets and prioritizes multiple projects within single high-use park units to improve accessibility.¹² Relatedly, DOI will also identify ways to better promote existing

⁹ Briefing provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior to House Natural Resources Committee Staff.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ "EXPLORE Act Outdoor Accessibility Implementation: Findings from a National Survey," 2026, <https://moveunitedsport.org/app/uploads/2026/03/Accessibility-Coalition-Findings-on-EXPLORE-Act-Opportunities.pdf>.

¹² Briefing provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior to House Natural Resources Committee Staff.

accessible features that may be underutilized or undercommunicated.¹³ DOI plans to implement a proof-of-concept project in summer 2026 as part of this strategy, with potential expansion by fall 2026.¹⁴ Further, DOI has also made significant progress in improving public-facing accessibility information and digital tools. To date, approximately 25 NPS websites have been updated to enhance accessibility information, with additional sites currently under review.¹⁵ New functionality is also planned for the NPS mobile application to allow visitors to access accessibility information when out in the field.¹⁶

USFS's early implementation of Title II reflects initial progress toward meeting statutory requirements, particularly in identifying accessible recreational opportunities and establishing internal coordination structures. USFS met its statutory deadline to identify accessible trails and recreation opportunities across all regions, conducted internal accessibility assessments, maintained close coordination with the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, and engaged with external partners.¹⁷ USFS continues to prioritize sites for accessibility upgrades and integrate accessibility into broader recreation planning, reporting improvements in trail upgrades, campground redevelopments, and water access enhancements.¹⁸ This work establishes a baseline for future action and supports implementation of Section 213 of Title II, which required agencies to develop a pilot program to improve priority trails by January 4, 2027.

Accessible Recreation in Practice



An example of how minor modifications can make a trail more accessible in Rocky Mountain National Park. The trail on the left features stairs that are impassable for many wheelchair users, compared to the trail on the right, which is more easily traversed by wheelchair users and still maintains a backcountry experience. **Source:** National Park Service, no date.

The need for accessible recreation is clear, and the model for delivery is already established. Across federal lands, agencies and partners have demonstrated that targeted investments in infrastructure, improved access to information, and the use of

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Information provided by U.S. Forest Service to House Natural Resources Committee Staff.

¹⁸ *Id.*

assistive technologies can significantly expand recreation opportunities for people of all abilities. Title II of the EXPLORE Act built on this foundation by providing a framework to scale these efforts across federal land management agencies, moving from isolated success stories to a more consistent and coordinated approach. In some cases, this type of expansion is already underway, providing early proof of concept for broader Title II implementation.

Across the National Park System, exciting accessibility projects are underway that can serve as models for large-scale implementation of the EXPLORE Act. For example, at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, planned improvements to the Taggart Lake Trail aim to transform a heavily used but degraded trailhead into an accessible trail that would allow visitors of all ability levels to experience one of the park’s most iconic landscapes.¹⁹ These improvements will add accessible parking, renew backcountry routes, and upgrade existing infrastructure at that park’s “most-frequented, year-round destination.”²⁰ At Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, the Heritage Trail Rehabilitation Project reflects a different, but equally important, approach.²¹ Rather than constructing new infrastructure, the park is modernizing an existing accessible trail by replacing aging boardwalks with more durable surfaces, improving safety, reducing long-term maintenance needs, and restoring access for wheelchair users.²² These upgrades demonstrate how accessibility improvements can also advance cost efficiency and long-term stewardship.

Other parks are expanding access through adaptive equipment and partnerships. Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado introduced all-terrain wheelchairs, accessible transportation options, and upgraded facilities to enable broader participation in outdoor recreation.²³ These tools allow visitors with mobility impairments to experience terrain that would otherwise be inaccessible. Similarly, Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina and Tennessee launched adaptive programming that allows visitors with mobility impairments to access backcountry experiences by using specialized equipment and volunteer support.²⁴ Yet another example of the



A High Efficiency Trail Assessment Process, or “HETAP,” is a wheeled piece of technology that is used to collect objective data on trail-accessibility standards such as slope and grade. **Source:** Beneficial Designs, no date.

¹⁹ “Reimagining Taggart Lake,” Grand Teton National Park Foundation, 2026, <https://www.gtnpf.org/taggart-lake/>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ “Heritage Trail Rehabilitation Project,” National Park Service, November 17, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/heritage-trail-rehabilitation-project.htm>.

²² *Id.*

²³ “How Rocky Mountain National Park is making trails more inclusive for all visitors,” The Optimist Daily, August 29, 2025, <https://www.optimistdaily.com/2025/08/how-rocky-mountain-national-park-is-making-trails-more-inclusive-for-all-visitors/>.

²⁴ “Breaking barriers: adaptive equipment in the Smokies,” National Park Service, January 14, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/breaking-barriers-adaptive-programs-in-the-smokies.htm>.

accessibility-enhancing successes of public-private partnerships is provided by Washington’s Mount Rainier National Park. Through a multi-year initiative, the park is advancing a coordinated effort to assess, document, and improve accessibility across trails, facilities, and visitor resources with “a wide network of advocates and community partners.”²⁵ Using a grant from the park’s philanthropic partner organization, NPS staff and community partners are systematically collecting detailed data on trail conditions, using specialized trail assessment technology to inform both infrastructure improvements and public-facing information.²⁶ This data is being translated into accessible guides and digital tools that allow visitors to evaluate recreation opportunities before arriving, lowering one of the most persistent barriers to access.²⁷



People with disabilities use a wide array of adaptive equipment to experience the outdoors, such as these visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park.

Source: Quinn Brett, no date.

BLM and USFS lands also demonstrate how expanded accessibility can increase recreation opportunities while supporting broader land management goals. In Vermont, the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests have collaborated with local stakeholders to improve the Stage Coach Trail through resurfacing, drainage upgrades, and structural enhancements.²⁸ The goal of this project was to provide additional “opportunities for hunting, fishing, and riding motorized vehicles on

trails that meet national standards for improving accessibility for visitors with limited mobility, including veterans.”²⁹ Similarly, in Oregon, BLM recently reopened the Lower Table Rock-Oak Savannah Loop Trail following upgrades that brought the trail into compliance with ABA standards, expanding safe access to a high-use recreation area that serves 50,000 visitors annually.³⁰ Beyond trail infrastructure, other accessibility efforts across BLM lands demonstrate how a broader range of recreation opportunities can be made more inclusive as a direct result of the EXPLORE Act. In Colorado, for instance, BLM followed the EXPLORE Act to work with

²⁵ Alex Day, “A Trail for Everyone: Access for All at Mount Rainier National Park,” Washington’s National Park Fund, December 29, 2025, <https://wnpf.org/2025/12/29/a-trail-for-everyone-access-for-all-at-mount-rainier-national-park/>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ “Improved trail access equals improved opportunities for those with disabilities on the Stagecoach Trail,” U.S. Forest Service, December 3, 2024, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r09/newsroom/releases/improved-trail-access-equals-improved-opportunities-those-disabilities-stage>.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Kyle Sullivan, “BLM reopens Lower Table Rock trails after improvements,” Bureau of Land Management, March 31, 2026, <https://www.blm.gov/announcement/blm-reopens-lower-table-rock-trails-after-improvements>.

state agencies, nonprofit partners, and outfitters to expand access for individuals with disabilities to activities such as hunting, fishing, and educational programming.³¹ These efforts included providing adaptive equipment, permitting accommodations, creating accessible trails, and leveraging new digital tools to support trip planning.³² BLM is also pursuing forward-looking improvements, including the development of adaptive bike trails and accessible fishing platforms.³³ Taken together, these approaches reflect the type of comprehensive, partnership-driven model envisioned under Title II and provide an early blueprint for scaling implementation across America’s public lands.

The Importance of Fully Implementing Title II of the EXPLORE Act

The EXPLORE Act’s considerable accessibility enhancements are vital to the health and well-being of millions of Americans with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities disproportionately suffer from mental health issues, with research showing that they “experienc[e] frequent mental distress almost 5 times as often as adults without disabilities.”³⁴ Accessible trails and adaptive recreation opportunities can also support physical rehabilitation for individuals with mobility impairments or recovering from injuries by providing opportunities for low-impact exercise in outdoor environments.³⁵

Such rehabilitation is critical for our nation’s veterans, many of whom experience service-connected disabilities and benefit from outdoor recreation as part of their physical and mental recovery.³⁶ Surveys indicate that roughly one in four veterans experiences difficulty during the transition back to civilian life, and an estimated 11 to 20 percent who served post-9/11 experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a given year.³⁷ Nature-based activities, such as hiking, camping, and other forms of outdoor recreation, have been associated with reduced anxiety and stress, improved psychological well-being, and stronger social connections among veterans.³⁸ Emerging research on nature-based therapy further suggests that structured outdoor

³¹ “BLM Recreation Sites Available to All: Exploring Accessibility on Colorado’s Public Lands,” Bureau of Land Management, April 28, 2025, <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2025-04-28/blm-recreation-sites-available-all-exploring-accessibility-colorados-public-lands>.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Alissa Greenberg, “Adapting national parks for wheelchair hiking,” PBS, April 12, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/disability-hiking-national-parks-accessibility/>; Szu-Ching Shen, et al., *Incidence, risk, and associated factors of depression in adults with physical and sensory disabilities: A nationwide population-based study*, National Institute of Health, March 31, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5376337/>; The Mental Health of People with Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 30, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/mental-health-for-all.html>.

³⁵ Pegah Derakshan, et al., “Adaptive outdoor physical activities for adults with mobility disability: a scoping review,” *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Science*, January 8, 2024, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10801018/>.

³⁶ “Disability Impacts All of Us,” National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disability, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 14, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>.

³⁷ Kim Parker, et al., “The American Veteran Experience and the Post 9/11 Generation, 2. Readjusting to Civilian Life,” Pew Research Center, September 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/readjusting-to-civilian-life/>; “PTSD in Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2026, <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/epidemiology/studies/new-generation/ptsd.asp>.

³⁸ Mark Wheeler, et al., *Outdoor recreational activity experiences improve psychological wellbeing of military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder: Positive findings from a pilot study and a randomised controlled trial*, PubMed Central, November 25, 2020, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7688151/>.

experiences can help individuals develop coping mechanisms, process trauma, and sustain long-term improvements in mental health.³⁹

Conclusion and Opportunities for Future Action

As federal land managers move into year two of the EXPLORE Act’s implementation, progress will be measured by moving from statutory direction to operational execution. This includes developing clear implementation plans, prioritizing high-impact areas for assessment and investment, and ensuring that accessibility data is translated into user-friendly tools for the public. The Trump administration has already made significant progress in this respect and has developed a meaningful framework for interagency coordination to elevate accessibility as a top recreation-focused priority. Reports to Congress at five- and seven-year intervals will also be critical for measuring progress and maintaining accountability.

While this important work continues, significant barriers remain to making federal lands fully accessible. For example, inconsistent and outdated federal definitions wrongfully limit the use of assistive technology in wilderness areas. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Congress reaffirmed “that nothing in the Wilderness Act is to be construed as prohibiting the use of a wheelchair in a wilderness area by an individual whose disability requires use of a wheelchair.”⁴⁰ However, the definition of wheelchair used for this particular provision defined wheelchairs as devices “designed solely for use by a mobility-impaired person for locomotion, that is *suitable for use in an indoor pedestrian area*.”⁴¹ This differs from the general definition of “wheelchair” under the ADA, which states that wheelchairs are “manually operated or power-driven device[s] designed primarily for use by an individual with a mobility disability for the main purpose of indoor, *or of both indoor and outdoor, locomotion*.”⁴² The Wilderness Act’s more limited definition of the term “wheelchair” has prompted confusion among user groups and inconsistent application across land management agencies.⁴³ This outdated definition also ignores the evolution of 21st-century mobility devices and technology, which now cover an array of options for all users with mobility impairments.⁴⁴ By updating this definition, Congress can clarify the Wilderness Act’s intent and ensure that outdated regulations don’t stymie access for individuals with disabilities to our public lands.

³⁹ Alexandra Troughton, et al., *Nature as a therapeutic place and tool for enhancing service users’ engagement in mental health services: A comprehensive synthesis of evidence*, Health & Place, Vol. 89, September 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829224001722>.

⁴⁰ 42 U.S.C. 12207(c).

⁴¹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

⁴² “What is the definition of a wheelchair under the ADA?,” ADA National Network, <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-wheelchair-under-ada> (emphasis added).

⁴³ 16 U.S.C. 1133.

⁴⁴ Quinn Brett & Erin Drake, “Wheelchairs in Wilderness: One User’s Perspective on Ways to Improve Wilderness Accessibility for All,” *International Journal of Wilderness*, Vol. 29, No. 2, December 2023, <https://ijw.org/wheelchairs-in-wilderness/>.