

**American Trails Testimony to the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Re: Implementation of Title II of the EXPLORE Act (Access America)
April 22, 2026**

Dear Chairman Westerman, Chairman Tiffany, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of American Trails and the Accessibility Coalition regarding implementation of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act.

American Trails is dedicated to advancing diverse, high-quality trail systems and greenways for the benefit of all people and communities. Through collaboration, education, and communication, we elevate the value of trails as essential infrastructure for transportation, health, recreation, and community connection. Our member organizations represent millions of Americans who invest their time, resources, and volunteer efforts into maintaining and enjoying trail systems across the country.

At its core, the EXPLORE Act represents a critical opportunity to expand equitable access to public lands for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. Its Title II provisions offer a strong statutory framework to address longstanding barriers to outdoor recreation, especially for individuals with disabilities. However, the success of this framework depends entirely on the federal government's capacity to implement it.

Staffing Capacity: The Central Barrier to Implementation

American Trails and our partners have long supported a successful public-private partnership model, working closely with federal land management agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), to advance shared priorities.

Today, that partnership model is under significant strain.

Across agencies, we are witnessing a substantial reduction in staffing levels, resulting in the loss of experienced personnel, institutional knowledge, and local relationships that are essential for implementation. While agencies consistently identify EXPLORE Act implementation as a priority, they also acknowledge that reduced workforce capacity is forcing difficult tradeoffs, often resulting in deprioritized recreation initiatives affecting recreation access and quality of experience.

We respectfully urge the Committee to prioritize:

- Dedicated full-time staff (FTEs) focused on accessibility implementation across federal land agencies; and
- Sufficient staffing capacity to provide technical assistance to field units and external partners.

Without adequate staffing, even the most thoughtfully designed statutory programs cannot succeed.

On-the-Ground Impacts of Staffing Shortages

The consequences of these staffing reductions are immediate and tangible.

For the past three years, American Trails has administered a highly successful grant program addressing deferred maintenance on U.S. Forest Service lands. This program leverages nonprofit expertise and volunteer labor to deliver an approximately 8:1 return on investment.

However, multiple grant-funded projects are currently stalled, not due to lack of funding or partner capacity, but because key Forest Service contacts have been lost. Without agency staff to provide coordination, approvals, and oversight, projects cannot move forward.

More broadly, the loss of skilled staff has led to a decline in basic trail maintenance capacity. As noted by the U.S. Forest Service, many ranger districts are now unable to conduct even routine maintenance. Front-country trails are being prioritized, while backcountry trails are increasingly neglected, which compounds deferred maintenance challenges over time.

These realities stand in direct tension with stated agency goals to expand access and improve visitor experiences.

Budget Reductions and Implementation Challenges

We are also concerned about proposed budget reductions that would significantly impact the programs needed to implement the EXPLORE Act. The proposed cuts, including a more than 31 percent reduction to Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness programs and a 35 percent reduction to Capital Improvement and Maintenance, raise serious questions about the federal government's ability to deliver on the Act's promise.

Outdoor recreation demand has grown dramatically over the past three decades and continues to rise. Yet participation remains uneven, particularly among historically underserved communities and individuals with disabilities. Addressing this gap requires sustained investment, not retrenchment.

Key EXPLORE Act Provisions to Expand Access

American Trails strongly supports the following provisions of Title II, which are foundational to improving accessibility on public lands:

- Section 211, Accessible Recreation Inventory
- Section 212, Trail Inventory
- Section 213, Trail Pilot Program
- Section 214, Accessible Trails
- Section 215, Accessible Recreational Opportunities

- Section 216, Assistive Technology

These provisions collectively represent a transformative step toward equitable outdoor access, if fully implemented.

The Critical Role of Information in Accessibility

One of the most significant and solvable barriers to access is the lack of reliable, objective information about trails and recreation facilities.

Accessibility is not one-size-fits-all. Individuals have diverse needs and preferences, and the ability to make informed decisions is essential. Providing clear, standardized information about trail conditions, such as grade, surface type, width, and obstacles, empowers users to determine which experiences are appropriate for them.

Importantly, improving access does not always require new construction. In many cases, access can be significantly enhanced simply by improving information.

Existing federal tools provide a strong foundation for this effort:

- The USGS National Digital Trail Explorer could be expanded to include accessibility data;
- Recreation.gov could serve as a centralized platform for accessible recreation information; and
- 3DEP Lidar Explorer Map (USGS) could help to determine accessibility data on trails.
- Dexebit user sentiment data insights to inform users about trails and recreational facilities.
- Increased training for federal land managers could improve the quality and consistency of accessibility assessments.

Targeted investment in these tools would yield substantial gains in equitable access.

Reframing Accessibility as a Universal Priority

Accessibility is too often viewed as a niche or secondary concern. In reality, it is a universal issue that affects, or will affect, nearly every American over the course of their lifetime.

Investments in accessibility benefit a wide range of users, including older adults, families with young children, veterans, and individuals with temporary or permanent disabilities. Integrating accessibility into broader recreation planning enhances outcomes for all users and strengthens the overall effectiveness of federal land management.

Conclusion

The EXPLORE Act offers a powerful opportunity to expand access to public lands and ensure that all Americans can experience the benefits of outdoor recreation.

However, realizing this vision requires more than statutory direction. It requires the staffing, funding, and partnerships necessary to bring these provisions to life.

American Trails and our partners stand ready to support this effort. Our public-private partnership model has demonstrated its effectiveness, but it depends on strong agency collaboration and sufficient staff capacity.

Expanding access to outdoor recreation is not only a matter of infrastructure. It is a statement about who belongs in our public lands. When people recreate together, barriers fall, perspectives shift, and communities grow stronger.

We urge the Committee to ensure that the implementation of the EXPLORE Act is matched with the resources necessary to succeed.

Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to expanding access to America's public lands.

Respectfully submitted,
Mike Passo, Executive Director, American Trails