



May 11, 2020

Senator Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader, United States Senate  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Rep. Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
1236 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Chuck Schumer  
Minority Leader, United States Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Rep. Kevin McCarthy  
House Minority Leader  
2468 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**Re: Economic stimulus and pandemic response priorities for the outdoor recreation community**

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader Schumer, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting unprecedented challenges to Americans' ability to maintain their health and economic survival. During these difficult and highly uncertain times, a profoundly important source of comfort and reprieve for many Americans is the opportunity to go outside to local, state, and federal public lands. We see great potential in leveraging this dynamic—the American desire to be outside—to help rapidly create jobs, help restart the economy, and create green and recreation infrastructure that will provide durable and equitable economic benefit to all Americans for decades to come.

Right now, the American desire to be outside is simultaneously encouraged and frustrated. All states with shelter-in-place orders recognize outdoor exercise as essential activity. At the same time, far too many Americans lack reasonable access to recreational opportunities and green space near home, especially in our cities. Where access opportunities are modest or even what we might normally consider above average, many land managers are forced to close down recreation opportunities because of crowded conditions stemming from demand far exceeding supply. While the need to close off access entirely as a result of

imbalanced supply and demand is new, the imbalance itself is not. For far too long, our country has neglected the need for close-to-home recreation opportunities, trails, and green space.

As our country works to weather, and then recover from, this pandemic, addressing the need for greater—and more equitable—access to outdoor recreation opportunities presents both an urgent need and a valuable opportunity. Investing in these opportunities will result in benefits that compound in numerous ways. First, as demonstrated vividly by recent events, Americans desperately want these opportunities, and providing more outdoor recreational resources to more people, wherever they live, will improve quality of life and mental and physical health for all Americans. Second, developing recreational amenities, as our country begins to recover from this economic calamity, will create opportunities to put people to work. As one example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service currently has \$5.5 billion in maintenance needs due to years of inadequate federal appropriations, including nearly \$300 million in trail maintenance needs, and this figure, however large, does not account for the tremendous opportunities to improve the lives of Americans through new recreational resource development. Moreover, the USFS represents only a fraction of all local, state, and federal lands. Third, these recreational resources, in turn, will help to support more vibrant economic activity, particularly in economically stressed rural communities; in addition to supporting the outdoor recreation economy, amenities like trails and river access points are a draw for employers and high-skill workers across a range of industries.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the value of outdoor recreation opportunities in attracting workers and employers and supporting public health and well-being, the outdoor recreation economy itself accounts for 2.2 percent of GDP and supports 5.2 million jobs, according to the most recent statistics from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and this sector of the economy is growing more than 50 percent faster than the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., THE SONORAN INSTITUTE, THE CAPITALIZATION OF OUR CLIMATE (2013) (finding that outdoor recreation accounted for 7.6 percent of the overall worker attraction value of the Phoenix-Tucson area).

economy overall.<sup>2</sup> As our country moves to work through our response to this crisis and address the recovery, public lands and waters and the recreation opportunities they support have an important contribution to make and require attention in potential upcoming legislation.

For many Americans, recent events have underscored the importance of outdoor recreation opportunities, particularly those close to home. Land managers at all levels—from local to state to federal—have had to grapple with how to balance people’s intense desire to turn to the outdoors for exercise, mental health, community, and solace with the immediate needs of protecting near-term public health. While the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic has hurt the outdoor recreation industry, alongside others, it has at the same time brought into even sharper relief the importance of recreation opportunities in supporting diversified economies.

Moving forward, Congress should immediately pass the S. 3422, the Great American Outdoors Act to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and begin addressing maintenance needs on our country’s public lands and waters. This legislation is thoroughly vetted, enjoys broad bipartisan support, including from the President, and is ready to pass today.

Our additional recommendations on how to ensure that outdoor recreation opportunities work in service of public health and economic recovery follow. They include:

- Investing in a Conservation and Recreation Corps to put Americans to work developing resources valuable to communities;
- Assisting outfitters and guides and streamlining recreational access through the Recreation Not Red-Tape Act;
- Increasing funding for land management agencies;
- Providing direct funding to state and local governments to ensure that economic challenges do not further exacerbate recreational access challenges; and

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<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and Prototype for States, 2017, *available at* [https://www.bea.gov/system/files/2019-09/orsa0919\\_1.pdf](https://www.bea.gov/system/files/2019-09/orsa0919_1.pdf).

- Protecting the public process and conservation values while ensuring that economic recovery efforts align with climate goals.

### **Pass S. 3422, the Great American Outdoors Act**

The Great American Outdoors Act comprises legislation providing permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and addressing the inadequate funding to meet the maintenance needs of our country's public lands. The bill enjoys strong bipartisan support and was scheduled for Senate floor time the week of March 23<sup>rd</sup> before events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic intervened. The President has expressed his support for fully funding LWCF and addressing maintenance funding needs, and similar bills to provide LWCF funding and address public lands maintenance have been reported by the House Natural Resources Committee. These programs are appropriate and necessary, now more than ever.

Passing the Great American Outdoors Act should be among the first steps that Congress takes in responding to our ongoing crisis. The legislation is thoroughly vetted, enjoys tremendous bipartisan support, and would provide immediate benefits by putting Americans to work addressing urgent public lands maintenance needs and developing equitably distributed, close-to-home recreational opportunities from local parks to trails systems and beyond.

LWCF has funded close-to-home recreation opportunities in all fifty states and every congressional district, and according to a recent study by the Trust for Public Land, spending on land acquisition through the Land and Water Conservation Fund produces a return on investment for local economies at a rate of 4 to 1.<sup>3</sup> These close-to-home opportunities are more important than ever as Governors across the country encourage citizens to enjoy the outdoors but stay in their local community.

GAOA also importantly directs 50 percent of currently unallocated energy development revenue to maintenance for our country's public lands. As a result of years of inadequate appropriations by Congress for the work of the public lands

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<sup>3</sup> THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND, RETURN ON INVESTMENT FROM THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND, <https://www.tpl.org/return-investment-land-and-water-conservation-fund>.

management agencies entrusted with stewarding our public resources, a substantial backlog of infrastructure and maintenance needs currently exists on our country's public lands and waters.

In recent years, attention has largely focused on the inadequate funding of maintenance needs of the National Park Service, and we strongly support efforts to ensure the sustainability and vitality of those iconic areas. We are also extremely pleased that the Great American Outdoors Act directs needed resources to other land management agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as the Bureau of Indian Education. The addition of the Forest Service, in particular, is a key improvement that renders the GAOA significantly better than previous bills to also address the estimated \$5 billion of maintenance needs on those public landscapes.

**Invest in coordinated capacity of conservation corps, contractors, state governments, and NGOs to pursue green infrastructure projects, including recreation infrastructure**

Recent events have underscored the importance of close-to-home outdoor recreation opportunities, from trails to river access points, for millions of Americans. These recreation opportunities and the societal benefits they provide are dependent upon resilient and healthy public lands and waters, which in turn provide myriad other benefits, from clean air and water to wildlife habitat. Now is the time to make a serious and substantial investment in our public lands and waters through projects aimed at ecosystem restoration, fire resiliency, watershed health, and outdoor recreation.

The development of outdoor recreation infrastructure, in particular, relies on NGOs, independent contractors, and volunteers to create and maintain many of the opportunities that support community public health and economic vibrancy. Congress must act to protect this existing workforce, but it should also go further and realize the job and economic growth potential of ecosystem restoration, recreation infrastructure construction, and on-the-ground stewardship activities by

establishing and funding a Civilian Recreation and Conservation Corps, modeled on the earlier Civilian Conservation Corps.

In addition to investing in the health of public lands and waters, many communities want to develop or expand their recreation economies, and it is the workers in the outdoor recreation industry, conservation and service corps, NGOs, and small businesses that perform much of the work supporting prosperous recreation economies. For many communities, the development of a recreation economy will be key to not only recovering from the ongoing pandemic, but also to diversifying economically and thriving over the long term. Funding this work will not only support individual jobs, but will redound to the long-term benefit of communities through the outdoor recreation economy, worker and employer attraction, and as a boost to quality of life and well-being.

A program could be modeled as a modern, evolved version of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), employing a networked approach where the federal government works in partnership with state and local governments, NGOs, and others. A Civilian Recreation and Conservation Corps could be sustained by funding (either directly from the federal government, or from state governments empowered by federal block grants) nonprofits and private contractors with existing partnership agreements engaged in recreation infrastructure improvement to plan and execute public works projects related to recreation infrastructure. Legislation could in part authorize the administration of grants to nonprofits and eligible small businesses and contractors to assist with planning, environmental analysis, and recreation infrastructure development for assets like trails, boat docks and launches, campgrounds, urban parks, snow parks, river parks, climbing areas, campgrounds, and access points for hunting and angling.

A substantial labor force already exists in the form of NGOs with acting federal, county, and state partnership agreements in place. The workforce is a complex network of youth conservation corps, career stewardship experts (for example, the Conservation Teams of Outdoor Alliance member, the Access Fund, or the International Mountain Biking Association's Trail Solutions), and project managers who organize initiatives, collaborate with land managers, and navigate environmental review and permitting.

A new stewardship and recreation infrastructure improvement program should also reflect how the right combination of recreation assets can benefit different types of communities. A Civilian Recreation and Conservation Corps could focus on areas that are most in need of economic help and which also overlap with high value recreation areas.<sup>4</sup>

**Assist Outfitters and Guides and improve close-to-home recreation opportunities by passing Recreation Not Red-Tape and direct assistance for facilitated access providers**

With outfitting and guiding businesses facing a potentially ruinous lost season, or an even longer shutdown, and more Americans looking for close-to-home recreation opportunities, now is the time to pass Recreation Not Red-Tape (S. 1967/H.R. 3458), which includes the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation (SOAR) Act (also a standalone bill, S. 1665/H.R. 3879).

Recreation Not Red-Tape will help reduce obstacles to getting people into the outdoors and improve the special use permitting process for facilitated access. This is particularly important when many facilitated-access providers (outfitters and guides, as well as nonprofits) are facing financial peril. At the same time, more Americans will be looking for safe and responsible ways to enjoy the outdoors, particularly when other recreational activities (such as team sports) may be limited. Making opportunities for instruction, guiding, or education available to more Americans will be key to ensuring safety and good behavior among public lands visitors.

Additionally, provisions within RNR directed toward cooperative shared stewardship agreements and interagency trail management will be important in making the most effective use of potential new resources for infrastructure construction, maintenance, and enhancement.

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<sup>4</sup> For an example of the value of outdoor recreation opportunities in supporting rural economic development, *see, e.g.*, OUTDOOR ALLIANCE, THE ECONOMIC INFLUENCE OF HUMAN POWERED RECREATION IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA, *available at* <https://www.outdooralliance.org/nantahalapigah-economic-reports>.

Finally, over the longer term, land managers will be better prepared to proactively address long-term growth in recreation participation—and the need to prioritize the protection and management of frontcountry areas for rural economic development and greater access to close-to-home recreation—through provisions to develop a National Recreation Area system.

Given the importance of facilitated access in ensuring that all Americans have the opportunity to build skills in the outdoors and enjoy their public lands and waters safely and responsibly, it is also essential that Congress work to protect the thousands of outfitters and guides and other facilitated access providers from financial ruin as a result of COVID-19 and necessary response measures. Our organizations strongly support direct assistance to these entities in order to ensure that they are able to remain in business and be prepared to begin helping Americans enjoy their public lands and waters again when public health conditions allow.

### **Increase direct funding for federal programs that support outdoor recreation**

As the country begins a gradual re-opening process, outdoor recreation is certain to play a significant role in the lives of individuals and communities. Among other changes, outdoor recreation, particularly from new participants, is likely to increase as other activities remain curtailed. At the same time, land and water managers are not as well equipped as they could be to accommodate a rush of demand, and investment in public lands infrastructure will be key in both meeting that demand and supporting rural economies. Because employment in the stewardship of public lands will support both direct jobs and more diverse economic activity, as well as ensure that resources are appropriately managed and protected, Congress must provide greater direct funding to federal management agencies to meet these responsibilities and opportunities.

Further, agency capacity is essential to ensuring that land managers are equipped to be good partners to NGOs and other entities that are prepared to take on recreational infrastructure development projects and other on-the-ground stewardship activities. These activities will play an important part of economic recovery in innumerable communities, and it is essential that shortfalls in agency

capacity do not create a bottleneck for necessary activity. NEPA planning and processing, permit approval, volunteer coordination, engineering, and agency science all play an important role in moving projects forward, and in our community's experience, many projects that have funding, environmental analysis and partnership agreements in place are not able to move forward for lack of agency staff bandwidth.

Congress should provide supplemental appropriations to land and water management agencies to, at minimum:

- Support the work of the USDA Forest Service through the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness and Capital Improvements and Maintenance budget lines;
- Provide additional funding for the Bureau of Land Management's Recreation Resources Management budget; and
- Support the National Park Service's National Recreation and Preservation; Facility Operations and Maintenance; and Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance budget lines;
- Provide direct funding for the Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration's Recreational Trails Program;
- Support NOAA's Coastal Zone Management, Coastal Resilience, and National Marine Sanctuaries programs that benefit U.S. coastal recreation and tourism;
- Fund the EPA BEACH Grants program to protect the health of millions of beachgoers and the economic benefits they generate;
- Provide additional funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) to support wastewater infrastructure projects that will put people back to work and fix and reduce sewage and stormwater problems that pollute our nation's waterways, impair community and ecosystem health, and threaten safe water recreation opportunities.

## **Provide funding to states, counties, and municipalities for parks and recreation infrastructure management**

Our organizations are concerned by the potential for an economic downturn to severely harm the accessibility and management of state parks and other recreation amenities. Over the years, there have been numerous examples of state parks closing because of states' financial distress. Given the likelihood that a return to more normal circumstances will come in stages, it is particularly important that close-to-home recreation opportunities are protected. This is both a matter of equity—working to ensure that all Americans, regardless of where they live, have an opportunity to get outside—and a matter of protecting national public lands (and land managers) from an unsustainable—and potentially dangerous—crush of demand.

Congress should look for opportunities to provide grants to states specifically targeted to ensuring that close-to-home recreation opportunities are adequately resourced to accommodate what is already a heavy surge in demand as some restrictions are lifted while other opportunities for recreation or entertainment remain closed or limited. Congress should also address this need by investing in the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP) and Urban Park and Recreation Recovery (UPARR) programs, which prioritize shovel-ready park development and projects that expand outdoor recreation opportunities in urban communities.

## **Protect public engagement and environmental values, and align stimulus priorities with climate objectives**

As Congress works to facilitate economic recovery in our country, the outdoor recreation community is concerned that an understandable desire to rapidly ramp up infrastructure development, in a variety of settings, will present a temptation to shortcut public participation in project development and environmental values. In particular, we view it as essential that the fundamental safeguards of the National Environmental Policy Act and the values that underpin them are not inappropriately circumvented.

NEPA is a critically important avenue for the public to engage in public lands management. It was enacted to shine light on government decision-making processes, and it ensures that agencies make informed decisions. An integral component to informed decision making is public involvement and participation, and NEPA is one of the most meaningful ways through which our constituents, and the public more broadly, participate in federal land management. Without a robust NEPA process, the “public” in public lands is less meaningful.

In addition to enshrining public participation in federal agency decision making, NEPA is intended to improve the quality of the human environment. It achieves this goal by relying on sound science to reduce and mitigate harmful environmental impacts. At its core, NEPA puts the environment on equal footing with economics and other factors. The importance of this principle cannot be overstated, and Congress should proceed cautiously to ensure that these values are protected.

Similarly, infrastructure and government spending efforts aimed at stimulating economic recovery present a significant opportunity to advance our country’s transition toward a clean energy future. We oppose measures that would have the effect of more deeply entrenching our country’s reliance on fossil fuels, particularly those that directly implicate development on public lands and waters. In contrast, we strongly support efforts to spur the development of appropriately sited renewable energy projects. In order to help land managers encourage and plan for this development, Congress should pass the Public Lands Renewable Energy Development Act (S. 2666/H.R. 3794).

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As our country navigates the complex challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, public lands and waters and the essential outdoor recreation experiences they support will play an important role in the physical, mental, and economic health of individuals and communities. We ask Congress to support these needs and opportunities vigorously in upcoming legislation.



Best regards,

Adam Cramer  
Executive Director  
Outdoor Alliance

Brady Robinson  
Executive Director  
The Conservation Alliance

Lise Aangeenbrug  
Executive Director  
Outdoor Industry Association



## **About Our Organizations**

### **Outdoor Alliance**

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten 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, the Mazamas, 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.

### **The Conservation Alliance**

The Conservation Alliance is an organization of like-minded businesses whose collective contributions support grassroots environmental organizations and their efforts to protect wild places where outdoor enthusiasts recreate. Alliance funds have played a key role in protecting rivers, trails, wildlands and climbing areas. Membership in the Alliance is open to all companies who care about protecting our most threatened wild places for habitat and outdoor recreation. Since its inception in 1989, The Conservation Alliance has contributed more than \$21 million, helped to protect more than 51 million acres of wildlands; protect 3,107 miles of rivers; stop or remove 34 dams; designate five marine reserves; and purchase 14 climbing areas. For complete information on The Conservation Alliance, see [www.conservationalliance.com](http://www.conservationalliance.com).

### **Outdoor Industry Association**

Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) is the national trade association for the outdoor industry and is the title sponsor of Outdoor Retailer, the largest outdoor products tradeshow in North America. OIA serves over 1,300 manufacturers, suppliers, and retailers through a focus on international trade and public lands and recreation policy, sustainable business innovation and outdoor participation.