



Thank you Chairs Neguse and Grijalva, Ranking Members Fulcher and Westerman, and Members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Betsy Robblee, and I am the Conservation and Advocacy Director at The Mountaineers.

The Mountaineers, based in Seattle, Washington and founded in 1906, is a nonprofit outdoor education, conservation, and recreation organization whose mission is “to enrich the community by helping people explore, conserve, learn about, and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond.”

Through Mountaineers programs, more than sixteen hundred skilled volunteers lead over three thousand outdoor education trips and courses annually for fourteen thousand members. Our youth programs provide over ten thousand opportunities each year for children to get outside, half of which are for underserved youth.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act.

We’d like to thank Chair Neguse and the Subcommittee for taking steps to advance legislation that will help ensure that everyone has access to our public lands. Like you, we believe in the value of transformative experiences in the outdoors. Many people’s first experience recreating on public lands is through outdoor programs like The Mountaineers offer, or through a guide or outfitter. This is especially true for communities that have traditionally faced barriers to accessing the outdoors.

However, the recreational permitting systems of the federal land management agencies make it difficult for outdoor leaders to take people outdoors. Outdoor programs like The Mountaineers must obtain special recreation permits to lead trips on public lands, but currently these systems are complex, inefficient, inconsistent, and labor intensive.

The SOAR Act will make special recreation permits easier for outdoor leaders to obtain and manage, and easier for agencies to administer.

As an outdoor organization based in the Pacific Northwest, we continue to feel the negative effects of the bureaucratic barriers of outfitter/guide permitting. We spend an enormous amount of staff and volunteer time navigating the various permitting processes of land management agencies. These convoluted systems are equally as challenging for under-resourced land managers to administer.



For example, we currently teach rock climbing courses in Leavenworth, Washington, in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, but we are unable to teach rock scrambling courses in that location because the Environmental Assessment did not include scrambling activities. Despite the fact that scrambling is substantially similar to hiking and rock climbing, which are included in the EA, we are unable to obtain a permit for scrambling and instead teach those courses on private land.

These challenges aren't just a bureaucratic headache. When outdoor education organizations like The Mountaineers aren't able to get the permits we need to conduct our programs, we miss out on opportunities to introduce young people to the wonders of nature and inspire the next generation of outdoor leaders and stewards.

Fortunately, the SOAR Act gives us an opportunity to improve the efficiency and functionality of the federal outfitting and guiding permitting systems.

- The SOAR Act will direct the agencies to evaluate the process for issuing special recreation permits and identify ways to eliminate duplicative processes, reduce administrative costs, and shorten processing times.
- It will increase flexibility for outdoor leaders by allowing them to engage in activities that are substantially similar to the activity specified in their permit, which will help address the issues we face in Leavenworth.
- The bill improves transparency by directing agencies to notify the public when new recreation permits are available and requires the agencies to provide timely responses to permit applicants.
- And it simplifies the permitting process for trips involving more than one land management agency by authorizing the agencies to issue a single joint permit covering the lands of multiple agencies.

Collectively, these common sense improvements will improve access to the outdoors, support the recreation economy, and inspire more people to care for our outdoor spaces. They will also make it easier for land managers to deliver on their mission of connecting Americans with their public lands.

The issues in the outfitter-guide permitting system being presented here today, and the opportunities for lasting, meaningful improvement that are contained in the SOAR Act, are a result of a careful, collaborative process. This is evidenced by the wide range of outdoor industry stakeholders who support the bill. By passing the SOAR Act, Congress has the opportunity to come together around a set of common interests and enact positive change that will support the recreation economy and help ensure equitable access to the benefits of nature.



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Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective, and I look forward to your questions.