

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

November 19, 2024

Representative Bruce Westerman
Chair, House Natural Resources Committee
202 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Raúl Grijalva
Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee
1203 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: November 20th full committee markup of public lands legislation

Chair Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, we write to express our views on public lands legislation being considered by the full committee on November 20th. This letter outlines our community's perspectives on three bills before the Committee—the Flatside Wilderness Additions Act, the MAPWaters Act, and the ROUTES Act—with the goal of informing your work to pass a year-end public lands package.

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.

Flatside Wilderness Additions Act (H.R. 3971)

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the Flatside Wilderness Additions Act, which would add 2,215 acres to the existing Flatside Wilderness in the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. Arkansas's Ozark Mountains are renowned for their beauty,



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their biodiversity, and their outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities. These public lands and recreation opportunities form the foundation of Arkansas's growing outdoor recreation economy, which supported more than \$4.1 billion in economic value-added and accounted for 2.5% of statewide GDP in 2022.¹

Wilderness protection supports a distinct primitive and unconfined recreation experience that is relatively rare in the eastern and midwestern states. The proposed Wilderness expansion will provide a protected buffer for the existing Wilderness area and will protect the viewshed of several hiking destinations in the area, including the Flatside Pinnacle. At the direction of Congress in 2019, the Forest Service studied potential additions to the Flatside Wilderness, and this legislation was crafted based on their findings. We strongly support the bill and recommend that it be included in a year-end public lands package. For a map of the proposed Wilderness additions, see Appendix 1.

Modernizing Access to Our Public Waters Act (H.R. 6127)

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the intent of the Modernizing Access to Our Public Waters Act (MAPWaters Act)—to standardize and modernize how federal agencies collect information related to access to federal waterways and make this information readily available to the public. However, we are concerned that this legislation might trigger new access restrictions and feel strongly that this concern must be addressed.

Federally-managed rivers are open for boating and other recreational activities unless they are explicitly closed or restricted. While plainly not the Act's intention, we are concerned that by requiring federal land managers to identify rivers that are open to public access, the MAPWaters Act fosters a "closed unless designated open" mindset and invites land managers to assert access restrictions, including where they may not be supported by law or policy. To account for this possibility, we recommend adding to Section 8 that nothing in this Act - "(4) *shall result* in new Federal waterway restrictions" to ensure that the act does not unintentionally result in new access restrictions on waterways. We would also strongly support a requirement for agencies to report any changes in waterway management in the

¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 23-54, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022 (2023).



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year following the Act and annually thereafter, as well as a requirement that agencies identify the authority for any asserted closure.

Restoring Our Unopened Trails for Enjoyment and Safety Act (H.R. 6994)

Outdoor Alliance supports the intent of the Restoring Our Unopened Trails for Enjoyment and Safety (ROUTES) Act, to quickly reopen recreation sites following natural disasters, but we are interested in working with the bill sponsors to refine the bill.

The ROUTES Act would establish a new categorical exclusion (CE) for recreation site restoration on Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service lands that would cover a number of activities, including hazard tree removal, soil stabilization, and repairs to recreation site drainage patterns. While it is likely appropriate for many of these activities to be covered by CEs, we strongly prefer that agencies develop CEs based on a record of prior environmental analyses rather than Congress legislating their particular terms. Further, we are concerned that broadly including hazard tree removal in the list of covered activities without appropriate sideboards (such as acreage limitations) could be interpreted in a way that could have significant environmental effects in areas surrounding recreation sites. Additionally, in our experience, other factors such as agency capacity issues and closures policies affect how and when land managers are able to reopen lands to the public. We look forward to working with the bill sponsors to address this important issue.

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Thank you for considering our community's input. We look forward to working with you to pass bipartisan public lands and recreation legislation in the 118th Congress.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Vice President for Policy and Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance



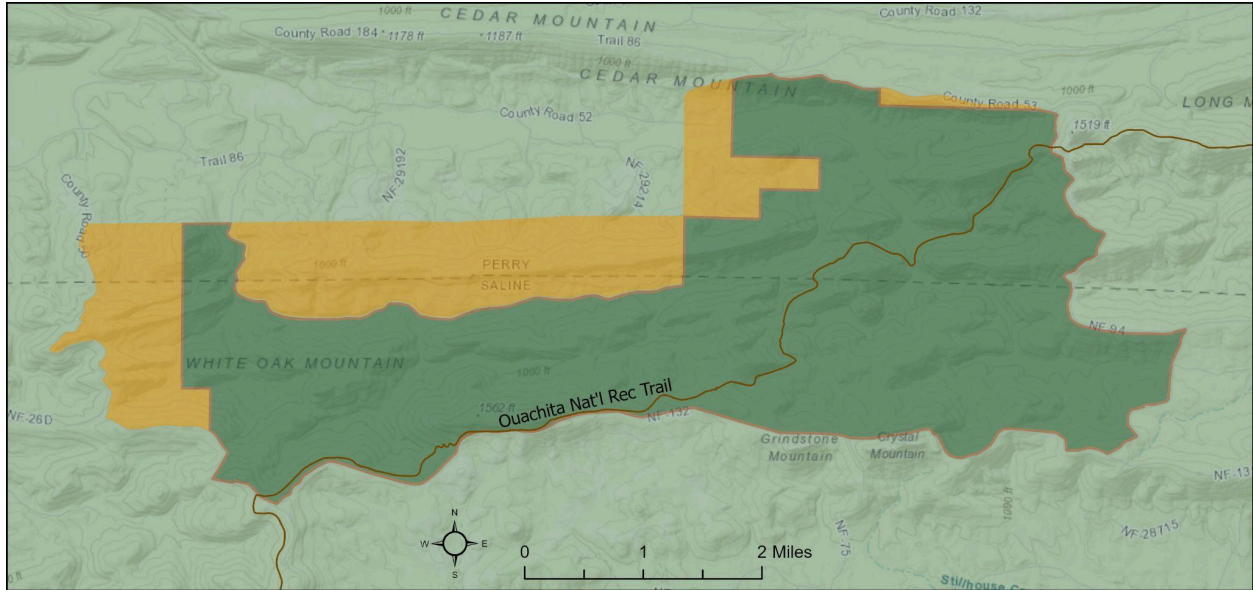
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cc: Adam Cramer, Chief Executive Officer, Outdoor Alliance
Heather Thorne, Executive Director, Access Fund
Beth Spilman, Executive Director, American Canoe Association
Clinton Begley, Executive Director, American Whitewater
Kent McNeill, CEO, International Mountain Bicycling Association
David Page, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers
Ben Gabriel, Executive Director, American Alpine Club
Rebekah Phillips, Executive Director, the Mazamas
Madeline Bachner Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Mountain Club
Chad Nelsen, Chief Executive Officer, Surfrider Foundation



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Appendix 1: Map of Proposed Flatside Wilderness Additions



Proposed Flatside Wilderness Expansion

- Ouachita National Recreation Trail
- Proposed Wilderness Expansion
- Flatside Wilderness
- US Forest Service

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November 2024

