

April 4, 2025

Representative Mike Simpson
Chair, Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Support for Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recreation funding.

Dear Chair Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee,

The undersigned organizations and businesses, representing the outdoor recreation community and the outdoor industry, write in support of strong funding for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) recreation programs in Fiscal Year 2026. Years of stagnant or declining funding for recreation management, coupled with a significant increase in recreation visits over the past two decades, has left both agencies without the resources needed to provide sustainable recreation access to the American public. This issue has been compounded by the recent hiring freeze and widespread layoffs at both agencies, which further constrain their capacity. Investing in BLM and USFS will improve the visitor experience on public lands while providing critical support to local and national outdoor recreation economies.

Specifically, we request that Congress provide:

- \$100 million for BLM Recreation Resources Management.
- \$70 million for USFS Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, with a commensurate increase to National Forest System Salaries & Expenses.

In recent decades, outdoor recreation has grown considerably in popularity, diversity, and economic importance, with a record of 175.8 million Americans venturing outdoors in 2024.¹ Nationally, outdoor recreation contributed \$1.2 trillion to America's economy, supported nearly 5 million jobs, and accounted for 2.3% of U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2023.² Research shows that outdoor recreation provides a significant return on investment, with recreation contributing nearly 14 times more to the GDP than what it receives from federal spending.³ Deeper investments from Congress will help unlock more of these economic benefits, particularly for local communities in the vicinity of public lands.

Despite the growth in outdoor recreation, both BLM and USFS have seen declines in recreation funding over the past two decades accounting for inflation. This trend creates a funding deficit that directly impacts the visitor experience. Parking issues, trash, unwanted fire starts, erosion, and other maintenance issues have all become more common across these public lands, sometimes in a way that creates a significant public safety issue. In some cases, even partner-led efforts to complete recreation infrastructure projects, such as trail systems, are delayed for years due to lack of capacity by agency staff to complete project planning or conduct necessary fieldwork—bottlenecking outside resources that

¹ 2024 Outdoor Trends Report Executive Summary, Outdoor Industry Association (2024).

² U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 24-53, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2023 (2024).

³ Recreation Funding in America: Current Results and Future Insights, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (2024).

could be deployed in supporting public lands with just modest investments in agency capacity. Additionally, the cost-of-living in many public lands gateway communities has increased dramatically in recent years, and some districts have been unable to fill recreation-related positions due to inadequate pay rates and cost-of-living concerns.

Unfortunately, though BLM and USFS have faced declining capacity for years, these challenges have been exacerbated by a recent hiring freeze and widespread layoffs at both agencies. The layoffs, in particular, disproportionately affected Forest Service recreation staff, and although some positions have been reinstated, many reinstated USFS employees were immediately placed on administrative leave, and additional layoffs are expected as agencies implement broader plans for reductions in force. Investing in BLM and USFS's recreation programs will bring much-needed stability to the recreation workforce and in turn help ensure that these agencies have the capacity necessary to provide a high-quality visitor experience and work with partner organizations to benefit America's public lands.

Increased funding is also needed to help both agencies implement the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE Act), a package of outdoor recreation legislation that Congress passed in December 2024 with overwhelming bipartisan support. EXPLORE, which represents the first comprehensive update to federal recreation policy in decades, would improve outdoor access in a number of ways, including by expanding access for veterans and servicemembers, supporting public lands gateway communities, expanding public/private partnerships for recreation infrastructure, creating long-distance bike trails, simplifying outdoor permitting, and more. Without adequate funding, the BLM and USFS will not be able to act on these directives, and Americans will not be able to realize the full benefits of this historic bipartisan legislation.

Our agency-specific requests are outlined below.

BLM FY26 Request: \$100 million for Recreation Resources Management

The Recreation Resources Management subactivity is the BLM's primary account for providing sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities across 245 million acres of public lands. Funds for this account help the agency provide for a wide variety of recreational experiences, ranging from front-country developed camping, to trail-based activities, to technical activities like climbing or whitewater paddling. Collectively, these recreation activities on BLM lands contributed \$11.1 billion to the economy and 73,000 jobs in 2022.⁴ Funding for Recreation Resources Management supports the planning, infrastructure, maintenance, and staff capacity necessary to provide a high-quality visitor experience, and also supports trails and water-based recreation opportunities, including BLM's extensive Wild & Scenic River system and the National Trails System, including National Recreation Trails.

Despite overseeing more lands than any other federal land management agency, BLM's recreation funding has historically lagged considerably behind other agencies.⁵ Since 2006, BLM has seen a 29% reduction in appropriations for Recreation Resources Management adjusted for inflation. Over a similar time period, visitation to BLM lands has increased 46%,⁶ and the number of full-time equivalents working under Recreation Resources Management has decreased by 27%, even before recent staff

⁴ U.S. Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, The BLM: A Sound Investment for America 2022 (2023).

⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-21-592, Federal Lands and Waters: Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation Is Limited (2021).

⁶ Visitation data are derived from BLM Public Lands Statistics Annual Reports 2006-2022.

reductions.⁷ This chronic underfunding creates a significant deficit in the agency's ability to address ever-increasing levels of recreation use.⁸ Funding at \$100M is necessary to address this deficit, account for inflation, and bring BLM's recreation capacity to levels more in line with current visitation levels.

Forest Service FY26 Request: \$70 million for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, with a commensurate increase to Salaries & Expenses.

The Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness budget line item is the foundation of the USFS's recreation program. Funds from this account are used to manage and maintain recreation sites like campgrounds and trails, rehabilitate recreation infrastructure, improve visitor use monitoring, and manage special use authorizations. The program also enables the USFS to manage and protect heritage sites and to steward the USFS's network of 451 Wilderness areas and 130 Wild & Scenic Rivers. Collectively, these recreation opportunities support significant economic benefits, with national forest visitor spending contributing about \$13.7 billion to the US economy and sustaining about 161,000 full-and part-time jobs.⁹

An increase to Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness is necessary to address inflation and cost-of-living for USFS employees and to account for a significant increase in recreational visits to USFS lands over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2020,¹⁰ funding for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness decreased 23% accounting for inflation,¹¹ while recreational visits increased 17%.¹² Over the same time period, the agency saw a 29% reduction in full time equivalents for its recreation program.¹³ While recreation visits have decreased somewhat following the Covid-19 pandemic, overall visitation to national forests remains high.

Importantly, our request includes a commensurate increase to Salaries & Expenses in order to account for recreation staffing needs. USFS employees are the backbone of the agency's recreation program, and the agency needs significant resources to rebuild its workforce, improve employee retention, and account for inflation. An increase to Salaries & Expenses is critical for addressing these workforce challenges.

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Thank you for considering our request for the FY2026 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. We stand ready to work with the USFS and BLM to support sustainable recreation opportunities on our nation's public lands.

⁷ Funding levels and FTE data are derived from BLM budget justifications for FY06-FY23. Inflation values were estimated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator with values set to October 2023 dollars.

⁸ See, Gwendolyn Aldrich and Evan Hjerpe, The Conservation Funding Crisis, Conservation Economics Institute (2022).

⁹ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey Results National Summary Report, Data collected FY 2018 through FY 2022 (2023).

¹⁰ In FY21, the USFS restructured its budget to include a new Forest Service Operations discretionary appropriations account and several salaries and expenses budget line items. This restructuring, known as "Budget Modernization," makes it difficult to compare FY21 and beyond to historical levels.

¹¹ Historic funding levels are derived from USFS budget justifications.

¹² Visitation estimates are derived from Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) National Reports and represent 5-year estimates of National Forest visits.

¹³ Recreation FTE data are derived from USFS budget justifications.

Sincerely,

Outdoor Alliance

Adventure Travel Conservation Fund
Age Up Well Taos
American Alpine Club
American Canoe Association
American Hiking Society
American Mountain Guides Association
American Whitewater
Appalachian Outdoors Collective
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Arkansas Climbers Coalition
Back Country Horseman of New Mexico
Barkeater Trails Alliance
Bay Area Climbers Coalition
Bikepacking Roots
California Mountain Biking Coalition
California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
Carolina Climbers Coalition
Cog Wild Bicycle Tours
Colorado Mountain Club
Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association
Conservation Lands Foundation
Eastside Sports
El Sendero Backcountry Ski and Snowshoe Club
Enchanted Circle Trails Association
Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance
Experiential Consulting
FishSki Provisions
Flickr
Friends of Joshua Tree
Granite Backcountry Alliance
Hipcamp, Inc.
Idaho Rivers United
Idaho Trails Association and Greater Boise Recreationists
International Mountain Bicycling Association
Latino Outdoors
Lowelives Respectable Citizens' Club
Montana Backcountry Alliance
National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance
NEMO
Oregon Timber Trail Alliance
Oregon-California Trails Association
Outdoor Industry Association
Patagonia

Peak Design
Pendergraft Outfitters
PeopleForBikes
Placer Group, Mother Lode Chapter, Sierra Club
Runners for Public Lands
Sage Trail Alliance
Salt Lake Climbers Alliance
San Diego Mountain Biking Association
Sierra Business Council
Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship
Silverton Singletrack Society
Snowlands Network
Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association
Spokane Mountaineers
Sun Valley Trekking
Tahoe Area Mountain Biking Association
Tahoe Mountain Sports
Taos Mountain Alliance
Teton Backcountry Alliance
Teton Climbers' Coalition
The Conservation Alliance
The Mountaineers
The Wilderness Society
Trailkeepers of Oregon
Ukiah Valley Trail Group
Verde Brand Communications
Wasatch Backcountry Alliance
Washington Trails Association
WenatcheeOutdoors.org
Wild Montana
Winter Wildlands Alliance