September 5, 2025

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

Rep. Jared Huffman
Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee
2330 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: September 5th field hearing on the Great American Outdoors Act

Chair Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and Committee Members,

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, thank you for holding September 5th's oversight hearing on Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) reauthorization. For nearly five years, the National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) established under GAOA has provided important funding to address a wide variety of deferred maintenance needs on federal public lands and waters. With the LRF set to expire later this month, it is critical that Congress act swiftly to renew the LRF so that this important work can continue. These comments emphasize our support for the LRF and outline our perspectives on potential changes to ensure that these funds continue to support high priority recreation access and infrastructure projects across the country.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of nine 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, 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.

In the time since Congress passed the GAOA, recreational use on federal lands has increased significantly, inflation has skyrocketed, and public lands have been affected by numerous extreme weather events. Despite these challenges, federal agencies have successfully used LRF funds to improve thousands of recreation assets, many of which directly improve access to federal lands and facilitate high quality, sustainable outdoor recreation experiences that provide direct economic benefits to local communities. At the NPS, these projects include:

- Modernization of the Tuolumne Meadows Campground in Yosemite;
- Demolition of hazardous and unneeded structures in the New River Gorge;
- Road rehabilitation in the Great Smoky Mountains;
- Water system updates at Rocky Mountain National Park;
- Campground rehabilitation in Zion National Park;
- Road and campground rehabilitation at Mount Rainier National Park.

Senate lawmakers have already introduced bipartisan legislation—the America the Beautiful Act (S. 1547)— to renew and extend the LRF. Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the Senate bill and we encourage the House to introduce and advance similar legislation. In particular, we appreciate that S. 1547 extends the authorization for eight years and recommend that the House adopt a similar timeline.

Although this field hearing is framed as addressing GAOA, our understanding is that the Committee intends to focus solely on LRF oversight and the need for reauthorization. In addition to establishing the LRF, GAOA also permanently authorized and fully funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)—a vital land conservation and recreation access program that is deeply important to our community. Unlike the LRF, the LWCF does not require reauthorization from Congress, and changes to LWCF are not needed at this time. The Committee should be clear that its intent is not to pursue changes to LWCF in tandem with LRF and that the success of these programs will be evaluated independently.

Our comments on specific aspects of the LRF are outlined below.

Reauthorize the Legacy Restoration Fund and Provide Additional Funding for Deferred Maintenance

The GAOA authorized the LRF at up to $1.9 billion annually for five years from Fiscal Year 2021 to Fiscal Year 2025. While LRF funding has been extremely helpful in tackling the substantial backlog of infrastructure and maintenance needs on our country's public lands and waters, much more needs to be done. Deferred maintenance on public lands is more than a five-year problem, and extending or permanently reauthorizing the LRF would provide agencies with a reliable funding source to address these maintenance needs across America's public lands into the future. A longer term reauthorization would also provide more certainty and predictability for local contractors, encourage local entry, and spur economic opportunities in rural areas.

The deferred maintenance backlog for all federal agencies was $41.13 billion at the end of Fiscal Year 2023.[1] At $1.9 billion per year, existing LRF funds are not sufficient to reduce this backlog over time, especially given inflation, which has risen significantly since 2020. The fact that the backlog has grown despite steady LRF investment is not evidence of program failure, but rather a reflection of the growing scope of needs and the economic reality that maintaining facilities and supporting outdoor recreation requires greater investment. The America the Beautiful Act increases funding to $2 billion annually, but even this level falls short of current maintenance needs. We encourage Congress to take these realities into account and increase funding for the LRF to a level more consistent with long-term maintenance needs.

Project Selection

Our community has generally been supportive of the projects selected for LRF funding by the National Park Service. These investments have spanned both rural and urban areas and included everything from large-scale infrastructure upgrades to improvements in trail systems, boat ramps, and other recreation assets. Outdoor

[1] U.S. Department of the Interior, *Response to Great American Outdoors Act, Legacy Restoration Fund Letter from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks Dated May 3, 2024* (August 2024); U.S.Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *National Parks Subcommittee Response* (June 2024).

recreationists benefit across this spectrum, and we support maintaining agency flexibility to direct funds where they are most needed.

We recognize that some LRF projects, such as road rehabilitation or wastewater treatment upgrades, have absorbed a large share of available dollars because they are inherently expensive. While less visible than a new trail or visitor facility, these projects are equally critical: safe roads, bridges, and modern wastewater systems are fundamental to public health, resource protection, and recreation access. Without them, visitors cannot reach trailheads, enjoy campgrounds, or experience the parks safely. We also note that investments in high-use urban sites are essential to providing close-to-home recreation opportunities for millions of Americans, including those who may not have the time or resources to travel to more remote parks. These sites play a vital role in connecting communities to public lands and building the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts. At the same time, we agree that smaller-scale assets—such as trails and rural recreation facilities—are the projects that most resonate with the public and attract valuable partnerships, while also providing a high return on investment. We support measures to encourage these projects. We also support increased transparency in project selection and additional opportunities for public input to help identify and prioritize projects that matter most to the public.

LRF was created to tackle the deferred maintenance backlog across our federal land management agencies, and that remains the priority. Despite meaningful progress, the scale of this backlog is still enormous, and existing LRF resources are inadequate to fully address it. Expanding the scope of LRF to cover cyclical maintenance or infrastructure modernization would dilute its effectiveness and make it even harder to reduce the backlog in a meaningful way. We agree that regular maintenance is essential—neglecting it can shorten the life of an asset and drive up long-term costs. But the solution is not to stretch the LRF beyond its intended purpose. Instead, cyclical maintenance and modernization must be addressed through robust annual appropriations for agency operations and maintenance. This ensures that LRF dollars remain focused on the unique challenge of deferred maintenance while giving agencies the resources they need to care for assets before they deteriorate. We would welcome an opportunity to work with the Committee to address cyclical maintenance needs through the appropriations process.

Agency Allocations

The GAOA authorized up to $1.9 billion annually for the LRF and allocated a percentage of these funds to each of five federal land management agencies, with the National Park Service (NPS) receiving the largest share (70%). GAOA allocations alongside the deferred maintenance backlog at the conclusion of Fiscal Year 2023 are shown in the table below:[2]

Agency	**GAOA Allocation**	**Share of DM Backlog (FY23)**
National Park Service	70%	57%
U.S. Forest Service	15%	21%
Bureau of Land Management	5%	14%
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service	5%	6%
Bureau of Indian Education	5%	2%

We support realigning the agency allocations under the LRF to more accurately reflect their overall share of the overall deferred maintenance backlog. In particular, National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands are extremely valuable for hiking, climbing, paddling, skiing, mountain biking, and other human-powered outdoor recreation pursuits, and addressing maintenance needs at these agencies is a high priority for our community. These agencies oversee more lands and receive significantly less funding for outdoor recreation in comparison with the NPS.[3] At a minimum, we recommend that the allocations for both BLM and the Forest Service be increased by 5% in order to better reflect their share of overall deferred maintenance.

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[2] *Id.*

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

International Visitor Surcharge

We understand the Committee is considering a modest surcharge on international visitors to generate additional revenue for National Parks. We recognize the appeal of this approach, as many other nations employ similar fee structures and the potential revenue could be significant. Our primary concern, however, is the mechanics of administering a tiered pricing system and the process for differentiating between domestic and foreign visitors at park entrance stations. Approaches that require frontline staff to verify citizenship or immigration status or process multiple fee schedules could undermine equitable access to public lands, increase congestion at already busy entrance gates, require additional staffing, and undermine the goal of raising revenue with minimal impact on visitors. If Congress chooses to pursue this idea, we encourage exploring implementation strategies that avoid these operational challenges rather than introducing complexity at park entrances.

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Thank you for your attention to this important issue. We look forward to working with you to extend this essential program to steward our nation's public lands and waters.

Best regards,

Louis Geltman
Vice President for Policy and Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance

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
Madeline Bachner Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Mountain Club
Chad Nelsen, Chief Executive Officer, Surfrider Foundation