

April 9, 2026

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Chair, Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

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

Chair Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and members of the Subcommittee:

The undersigned organizations and businesses, representing the outdoor recreation community and industry, write in support of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recreation programs in Fiscal Year 2027. Robust investments are needed to keep pace with growing demand for outdoor recreation on public lands, support local and national outdoor economies, and implement the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act. Specifically, we request that Congress:

- Provide \$100 million for BLM Recreation Resources Management.
- Provide \$70 million for USFS Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, with a commensurate increase to National Forest System Salaries & Expenses.
- Include report language to address hiring barriers for recreation staff.

Recent data shows that outdoor recreation continues to grow in both overall participation and as an important sector of America's economy,¹ supporting \$1.3 trillion in economic output and 5.2 million jobs and comprising 2.4% of U.S. gross domestic product in 2024.² Outdoor recreation provides a significant return on investment, 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.

Both BLM and USFS have seen a significant increase in recreational visits in recent years, while recreation funding has declined accounting for inflation.⁴ This trend creates a funding deficit that directly impacts the visitor experience. Parking issues, trash, unwanted fire starts, erosion, and other maintenance issues have increased across these public lands, sometimes creating significant public safety issues. In some cases, 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 could be deployed in supporting public lands with just modest investments in agency capacity.

¹ Outdoor Industry Association, *2025 Outdoor Participation Trends Report: Executive Summary* (2025).

² U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, U.S. and States, 2024* (2026).

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

⁴ BLM budget justifications and Public Lands Statistics show that, over the past two decades, the agency has seen a 33% reduction in appropriations for Recreation Resources Management adjusted for inflation, while recreational visits have increased 46%. Similarly, USFS budget justifications and National Visitor Use Monitoring data show that between 2010 and 2020 (when the agency changed its budget structure), funding for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness decreased 23% accounting for inflation, while recreational visits increased 17%.

Unfortunately, both agencies have seen extensive staff losses over the past year, which have disproportionately affected their recreation programs. Since the beginning of FY25, the USFS has lost 9,296 staff, while the BLM has lost 1,617 staff.⁵ Although the recent passage of FY26 appropriations has helped bring some stability to these agencies, a federal hiring freeze currently prevents hiring vacant positions needed to provide a high-quality recreation experience.

FY27 funding is especially needed to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the EXPLORE Act. Passed in December 2024, EXPLORE is the first comprehensive update to federal recreation policy in decades. If effectively implemented, EXPLORE will improve outdoor access for veterans and service members, support public lands gateway communities, expand public/private partnerships for recreation infrastructure, create long-distance bike trails, simplify outdoor permitting, and more. Agency staff are currently working hard to meet the bill's early planning deadlines, but EXPLORE's longer term, tangible benefits—trails improved, partnerships signed, permits streamlined—cannot be realized without greater investments in agency staff, including at the national and regional levels.

BLM FY27 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, from frontcountry developed camping, to trail-based activities, to technical activities like climbing or whitewater paddling. Collectively, these recreation activities on BLM lands contributed \$18.1 billion to the economy and 97,300 jobs in 2024.⁶ Despite overseeing more lands than any other federal land management agency, BLM's recreation funding has historically lagged considerably behind other agencies.⁷ 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. Funding at \$100M is necessary to account for inflation and align BLM's recreation capacity with current visitation levels.

Forest Service FY27 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 extensive network of Wilderness areas and 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.⁸ Funding at \$70 million, along with a commensurate increase to Salaries & Expenses, is necessary to address inflation

⁵ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Federal Workforce Data: Workforce Changes, <https://data.opm.gov/explore-data/analytics/workforce-changes> (last visited Mar. 26, 2026).

⁶ U.S. Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, *The BLM: A Sound Investment for America 2025* (2025).

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-21-592, *Federal Lands and Waters: Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation Is Limited* (2021).

⁸ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, *National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey Results National Summary Report*, Data collected FY 2018 through FY 2022 (2023).

and increased visitation, address recreation staffing needs, and account for the cost-of-living in national forest gateway communities.

Report Language Request: *The [Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management] shall resume hiring for recreation and trails positions, including permanent positions, in order to provide and maintain appropriate access and recreation for visitors, including by maintaining natural and physical infrastructure, and by fully implementing the requirements of the Expanding Public Lands and Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (Public Law 118-234 (2025)).*

Federal workforce reductions in FY25 and FY26 resulted in a high number of experienced recreation employees leaving the USFS and BLM, causing a high number of vacancies in critical recreation and trails positions. Although the FY26 Interior Appropriations bill restored funding for these agencies' recreation programs to FY24 levels, both agencies are operating under a hiring freeze that prevents them from filling strategic permanent positions, even when funds are available. These staff vacancies are currently hampering both agencies' work to implement the EXPLORE Act, which requires a sustained capacity investment from regional and national staff—those most affected by federal workforce reductions and the recently announced USFS reorganization plan. Without additional permanent staff, neither agency will be able to implement EXPLORE in a timely manner. To address this issue, we request that the Committee include report language renewing the USFS and BLM's authority to hire permanent staff within their recreation and trails programs.

* * *

Thank you for considering our request for the FY27 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.

Sincerely,

Outdoor Alliance

Adventure Cycling Association
Adventure Travel Conservation Fund
Alaska Off-Road Cycling Alliance
Alaska Trails
AllTrails
American Canoe Association
American Hiking Society
American Whitewater
Anchorage Park Foundation
Arkansas Climbers Coalition
Barkeater Trails Alliance
Bay Area Climbers Coalition
Big Mountain Dreams
Bikepacking Roots
Black Hills Bike Hub
California Mountain Biking Coalition
California Outdoor Recreation Partnership

CalWild
Camp Grier
Carolina Climbers Coalition
Chugach Mountain Bike Riders
Colorado Mountain Club
Conatus Counsel
Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association
Conservation Lands Foundation
Duct Tape Then Beer
Enchanted Circle Trails Association
Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance
Friends of Joshua Tree
Greater Boise Recreationists
Greenbrier River Watershed Association
Grove Institute
Hipcamp, Inc.
Inland Seas Education Association
Latino Outdoors
Leave No Trace
Lowelifes Respectable Citizens' Club
Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation
Methow Valley Trails Collaborative
Mind & Mountain
Mountain Bike the Tetons
onX
Oregon Trails Coalition
Oregon-California Trails Association
Outdoor Industry Association
Patagonia
Peak Design
Pendergraft Outfitters
PeopleForBikes
Point to Point Photography
Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association
Runners for Public Lands
Salt Lake Climbers Alliance
Snowshoe Highland Area Recreation Collaborative Trails
Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition
Sierra Nevada Alliance
Singletrack Advocates (Alaska)
Southern Nevada Mountain Bike Association
Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association
Tahoe Area Mountain Biking Association
Tahoe Backcountry Alliance
Team Dirt
The Mountaineers
The Running Kind
The Vermont Mountain Bike Association

The Vermont Trails & Greenways Council
The Wilderness Society
Trailkeepers of Oregon
Trans-Cascadia
Triple Point Training
Wasatch Backcountry Alliance
Washington Trails Association
WenatcheeOutdoors
West Virginia Rivers Coalition
West Virginia Trails & Recreation Advocacy & Information Link
Wild Montana
Winter Wildlands Alliance