

Jessica (Wahl) Turner
President, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable

Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Thursday, December 2, 2021; 10:00am; Dirksen Senate Office Building 366

Dear Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso and Members of the Committee:

First and foremost, on behalf of the outdoor recreation business community, thank you for today's hearing on impactful bills that support outdoor recreation for all Americans and the businesses and communities that rely on a strong outdoor recreation economy. The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) is the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation entities – now totaling 35 national association members representing more than 110,000 American outdoor businesses and the full spectrum of outdoor activities. Prior to the pandemic, our sector generated \$788 billion annually in economic output, comprised 2.2 percent of the United States GDP and 5.2 million jobs. At a time of unprecedented economic growth, we were growing faster than the economy in every indicator, surpassing other key sectors such as extractive industries, agriculture and computer and electronic products.

This day is a long time coming. Over the past few years, outdoor recreation has seen tremendous growth in popularity and importance. It is not just an economic driver, but also a mechanism for mental, physical, and societal health. Over the past year and a half, as Americans sought safe, family-friendly experiences, a newfound appreciation for the outdoors emerged. Sixty-five percent of all Americans looked for outdoor recreation opportunities during the pandemic. This unprecedented participation growth has skyrocketed demand in outdoor gear, apparel, vehicles, equipment, and experiences across the recreation activity spectrum. Despite these record-breaking sales in some segments, there are growing challenges to consider. How do we manage for more visitors while ensuring quality outdoor recreation experiences and the health of our public lands and waters? How do we support businesses who were impacted by canceled trips/travel or closures as a result of COVID-19 mitigation efforts? How do we make sure communities have the assistance they need to support sustainable recreation while advancing equitable access to front-country and backcountry outdoor recreation?

The bills being discussed today answer these questions by driving pragmatic solutions forward that facilitate more people getting outside, while protecting our natural resources now and for generations to come. Led by the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, the outdoor business and user community has been calling on Congress to enact legacy legislation for our great outdoors by passing a first-of-its-kind Outdoor Recreation Package. Now is the time to update management policies and plans for 21st century recreation demands and provide opportunities for Americans in every corner of the U.S. to benefit from time spent outside. These bipartisan and bicameral bills don't cost taxpayers money and make common sense reforms that will improve land and water management, helping people enjoy the outdoors in their own communities and at iconic destinations across the country. Passage of the **Outdoor Recreation Act, Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation (SOAR) Act, and the Recreation Not Red Tape (RNR) Act**, among the other pragmatic outdoor recreation bills being discussed today, will allow our industry to excel at what we do best: support healthy people, places, communities, and economies.

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We've seen these types of packages for other industry sectors of similar or even smaller size, and it's time the outdoor recreation industry receives the same recognition and focus. **These important bills do so much for this growing sector, and the millions of Americans seeking outdoor experiences now and for generations to come.**

Supporting the Outdoor Recreation Industry and Americans Recovering from COVID-19

Even with Americans prioritizing time outside like never before, our industry has suffered from months of closures (state and national lands and waters, manufacturing, retail stores, campgrounds, marinas, hospitality, ski resorts, guides and outfitters, etc.), supply chain disruptions, workforce shortages, and necessary efforts to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Our sector lost billions of dollars in revenue due to canceled trips and travel from domestic and international visitors, which impacted thousands of small outdoor businesses and the gateway communities that rely on them, many of which are in rural areas.

Among the standout statistics from 2020's economic impact study from the Bureau of Economic Analysis was a 35 percent decline in trips and travel and 62 percent decline in outdoor recreation-related transportation and warehousing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 75 percent of small businesses in the category that includes outdoor recreation reported large and negative effects in 2020. Overall, our sector was hit 31 percent harder than the national average, making our industry the second most affected sector in the country behind food and accommodation. We are optimistic about continued positive trends in sales and participation and fortunately today's bills take great strides in repairing this damage and bolstering our sector.

The SOAR Act will help streamline the permitting process on public land in order to provide significant improvements for guides and outfitters, nonprofits, and education institutions that have been burdened by a complex, costly, and duplicative permitting process that too often does not authorize new permits. Additionally, updating this antiquated system will provide targeted relief to small businesses suffering greatly from COVID-19 and in need of additional assistance due to record wildfires and drought affecting much of the country.

The Recreation Not Red Tape Act adds onto SOAR's benefits with important provisions like establishing online payment processing for certain federal passes and fees, enabling Americans to plan their visits from the comfort of home. It also engages the private sector in volunteer opportunities to efficiently address stewardship, which eliminates unnecessary duplication through inter-agency coordination, encourages land managers to account for outdoor recreation in planning efforts, and enhances outdoor recreation opportunities in shoulder seasons, among other necessary proposals.

Addressing Visitation Increases and Overcrowding

We have seen the stories about overcrowding on our national parks and forests. Metro areas have also experienced significant increases in park visitation, ranging anywhere from six to 145 percent.¹ Stats like this paint a clear picture of what Americans value during challenging times,

¹ Detecting Change in Human Mobility in Parks; Conservation Innovation Center, Chesapeake Conservancy; Google COVID-19 Mobility Report

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like the benefits of time spent in nature, and there is no better place than in a park, on a river, in a boat, on skis, camping in an RV, on an ATV or on a bike. With this exciting and unprecedented interest in outdoor recreation, we must also actively consider ways to ensure the health of our natural resources. After all, our industry is only as healthy as the lands and waters that serve as the backbone of our recreation economy.

The Outdoor Recreation Act, introduced by Chairman Manchin and Ranking Member Barrasso, includes impactful provisions to ensure that participation in public lands and waters is enduring. One provision we are particularly excited about improves data collection and utilization by establishing a single visitation data management and modeling system to provide accurate, real-time visitation data at outdoor recreation locations. Federal land and water management agencies have historically conducted surveys to measure outdoor recreation visitation specific to their individual agency, which unfortunately cannot be assessed across agencies as the models, timelines and analysis are all unique. Agencies have also broken-down outdoor recreation on their lands into specific categories, but these categories are not standardized across the agencies and oftentimes don't account for all forms of outdoor recreation.

Because of this, a gap exists in understanding the economic impacts and jobs supported by outdoor recreation, as well as the overall picture of outdoor recreation activities occurring on our shared lands and waters. This has been especially difficult for management during the pandemic, where we've wanted as many Americans as possible to enjoy time outside but haven't had an accurate depiction of how, when, and where they are recreating. This makes it difficult to maintain resources, a safe capacity, and to know where to disperse users to less-visited sites. Real-time data would allow the visiting public to make decisions on the types of experiences they want to have or know when an entrance/parking lot may be at capacity before they get to the site. This would enable them to make changes in their plans and visit another location with similar outdoor recreation assets or amenities and perhaps a better outdoor experience.

If an alignment existed between the federal agencies on how they surveyed for outdoor recreation and subsequent impacts, federal land managers could confidently determine where restoration is most needed, what wildlife populations should be more closely monitored, and what places we should collectively focus on encouraging more visitation to, as well as connecting with communities to support sustainable engagement. This is critical for future funding and management determinations with many new users hoping to enjoy their recent investments in boats, RVs, tents, and other equipment purchased these past few years.

Growing Outdoor Access and Business Opportunities in Communities Across the Country

This spring, as governors restricted travel and encouraged residents to use their local communities for outdoor recreation, the realization that more than 100 million people are not within ten minutes of a park or green space² became increasingly apparent. Meanwhile, some outdoor recreation sites are underutilized, not accessible or not welcoming for all communities. This necessitates more strategic and thoughtful development of outdoor recreation access and management decisions. As we look at the overcrowding of some federal lands, we must weigh that against the many communities who could not access the outdoors during a time when they

² Trust For Public Land ParkScore Index (May 21, 2020) <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>

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needed it the most. Looking at park size and density shines a light on the disparities in access to green space. Of 14,000 cities and towns analyzed, parks serving a majority of people of color average half the size while serving five times as many people.³ With more visitors heading outside, more equitable investments in access and infrastructure are needed to ensure all Americans can benefit from the mental and physical health aspects of outdoor recreation. For this reason, we appreciate the consideration of the Outdoors for All Act, Parks, Jobs, and Equity Act and the Environmental Justice in Recreation Permitting Act in today's hearing.

The Outdoor Recreation Act also includes provisions that unlock private funding for partnerships, support rural communities near major outdoor recreation destinations with new entrepreneur and vocational training programs, technical assistance and low-interest business loan programs, as well as increased broadband connectivity on federal public lands and waters to ensure that businesses and the public alike have high-quality internet access.

These provisions and others being shared today help ensure that outdoor recreation assets can support 21st Century demands by adding tools to managers' toolboxes and modernizing systems so our outdoor treasures remain accessible long into the future. All of the provisions included in today's hearing would have wide-ranging positive impacts across a variety of federal agencies, and we hope to see other agencies outside the committee's jurisdiction like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers included in future legislation. Combining bills like the Outdoor Recreation Act, SOAR, RNR and others like the Ski Hill Resources for Economic Development Act and the Modernizing Access to Public Land Act into a first-ever Recreation Package would truly be a legacy achievement for the committee and the outdoor recreation economy across the country.

To recover from this economic recession, create sustainable jobs and communities, and contribute to overall quality of life in America, swift action is needed on smart policy and management decisions so we can truly harness this surge in outdoor recreation and provide opportunities for improved health and quality of life for generations to come. There has never been a better time to consider a Recreation Package made up of critical management policies like those before us today to ensure the federal government is investing in places and tools that can revitalize not just our economy, but also our collective spirit.

Thank you for holding this important hearing and please consider ORR a partner in supporting the advancement of these bills throughout the legislative process.

Sincerely,



Jessica Wahl
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³ Trust For Public Land Parkscore Report "Parks and an equitable recovery" (May 27, 2020)