

**TESTIMONY of
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NATIONAL PARKS
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Concerning
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT**

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act. My testimony today will discuss our appreciation of the Great American Outdoors Act, the deferred maintenance backlog on National Forest System lands, Legacy Restoration Fund project selection and implementation, forest land conservation, and implementation of the Land Acquisition and Forest Legacy Program projects funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The USDA Forest Service is incredibly appreciative of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and how it allows us to better serve the nation. We are a values-based, mission-driven, and relationship-focused organization. Living our core values takes work; it is as important as the work we do every day to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Our mission success is strengthened by anchoring to our values of conservation, service, diversity, safety, and interdependence. The GAOA is helping us live out our values and deliver the best possible experience to the American people.

We are committed to equitable outdoor access; providing clean air and water to all communities, especially our most vulnerable ones; and securing the abundance, resilience, and accessibility of the natural resources within our national forests.

Over the years, public use of National Forest System (NFS) lands has continually increased as more Americans visit our public lands. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Agency saw a tremendous increase in recreational visits to national forests. In 2020 alone, there were approximately 168 million visits to lands managed by the Forest Service, an increase of 18 million visits compared to 2019. Our public lands are an important component of our nation’s wellbeing. We are moving forward with implementation, which will enable federal land managers to take aggressive steps to address deferred maintenance and other infrastructure projects on national forests and grasslands through 2025. We will use these funds to maximize the benefits experienced by millions of Americans who visit and use their national forests. Projects funded by this act will focus on improving conditions on forest and rangelands, reducing wildfire risk, and increasing the resiliency of our nation’s forests for present and future generations.

Deferred Maintenance on National Forest System Lands

The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands across 43 States and territories. These lands include more than 371,000 miles of roads (64,600 miles for passenger vehicles), 13,800 bridges, 160,000 miles of trails, 1,700 dams and reservoirs, 1,500 communications sites, 30,000 recreation sites, and 40,000 facilities of other types, all of which require ongoing maintenance to continue to meet growing public needs and provide economic benefits to communities, particularly important in rural areas.

Recreation on NFS lands contributes more than \$13.5 billion to America's gross domestic product and supports more than 168,000 full and part-time jobs, the vast majority of which are in gateway and rural communities. Increases in visitation are an exciting opportunity to serve more Americans, increase the economic vitality and quality of life in communities, improve mental and physical health of recreationists, and connect even more people to nature and conservation. While increased visitation creates opportunities to provide such connections to more Americans, it also presents certain challenges.

One salient challenge is that non-fire Agency personnel have declined by 40% since the late 1990s. This reduction complicates efforts to maintain the Agency's extensive infrastructure and capital assets. Concurrently, the growing wildfire risk means more Forest Service resources are allocated to firefighting and prevention efforts, resulting in a growing backlog of deferred maintenance, which we recently estimate at \$6.3 billion.

National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund Implementation

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) established the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and provides up to \$285 million each year through Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 to the Forest Service to reduce the Agency's backlog of deferred maintenance. Projects funded by the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) are projected to contribute \$420 million to the gross domestic product annually. For FY 2021, the Forest Service reviewed more than 900 proposed projects and selected more than 550 projects in 43 states and Puerto Rico, which were authorized by Congress for implementation. When completed, these FY 2021 projects, many of which are multiyear-funded projects, will reduce \$375 million of the Agency's deferred maintenance backlog while improving recreation facilities, visitor centers, and dams, and increasing public access by repairing roads, trails, bridges, tunnels, and parking areas.

The Forest Service submitted the FY 2021 list of proposed deferred maintenance projects within 90 days of GAOA's enactment, as mandated by the Act. We relied on seven criteria in assessing projects: reducing deferred maintenance; promoting management of America's forests; improving visitor experience; contributing to rural community economic development; improving visitor access; ensuring health and safety; and leveraging external resources.

The Agency has integrated LRF into our Capital Improvement Program and rebranded it as the National Asset Management Program for the FY 2022 project list and beyond. The Forest Service has proposed 456 projects for funding in FY 2022. The projects selected for FY 2022 include approximately 100 multi-year projects initiated in FY 2021. We are making strategic, data-driven decisions focused on identifying projects that deliver in six specific benefit areas to the public. These are economic; recreation and public access; environment and sustainability; active forest management; fire operations; and research and development. The Agency develops a nationally prioritized list of projects for funding by applying criteria pertaining to these six

benefits. In addition, 40 percent of LRF funding is dedicated to regional priority projects that reduce deferred maintenance. This model of supporting both national and regional priorities was developed because the Forest Service recognizes community and state priorities may not result in projects that are selected nationally. As a result of this approach, the Forest Service project list provides an investment in deferred maintenance reduction that values both locally and nationally significant projects.

The funding authorized by GAOA serves as a catalyst for rural economic development and employment opportunities through investments in infrastructure. We are working to ensure project selection also benefits underserved communities as part of the Administration's priority of Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (Executive Order 13985). Starting in September 2020, we held seven national listening sessions involving dozens of partner organizations, including representation from underserved communities, with information on how to get involved and develop project proposals. We met with stakeholders at the national, state, and local level.

For FY 2021 projects, the Agency solicited public comment on the proposed list of projects. The Agency also created a tool on our website to allow the public to provide feedback on GAOA implementation. Additionally, two national level sessions were hosted by the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable and the National Forest Foundation to determine the best approach for implementing LRF projects. Strong outreach is ongoing throughout the Agency's regions with local communities, Tribes, and State and local governments.

Thus far, the Forest Service has expended approximately \$125 million of the funds allocated for FY 2021 projects. More than 200 of the over 550 projects have been completed or are under construction. The remaining projects are progressing through contracting and agreement processes and being prepared for implementation during the upcoming field season. These projects involve extensive work with Agency partners. Approximately 25 percent of the projects have a partner providing cash or in-kind contributions, resulting in execution of over 200 cooperative agreements, contributing an additional \$160 million to the FY 2021 projects.

These projects will deliver significant local benefits across the country. In Maine, \$733,820 of the FY 2021 fund was approved for a project to reconstruct nearly five miles of Deer Hill Road to improve access and connectivity for local communities to the White Mountain National Forest. When completed, this project will expand access to public lands for Stoneham, Maine, and surrounding communities. In Montana, two bridges were replaced on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, on the Timberline Trail and the Blue Lake Trail, with help from the Montana Conservation Corps. A third bridge in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness is slated for work in spring/summer of 2022. The Forest Service invested \$239,473 into these projects, which together will provide benefits to local communities who rely on access during hunting and winter recreation seasons.

The FY 2021 process for project development, selection, and implementation has informed the Forest Service approach for FY 2022 and FY 2023. The Forest Service proposed a reserve fund as part of its FY 2022 proposal to Congress due to supply chain issues and other project implementation challenges. This fund will enable the Agency to ensure project work can continue uninterrupted as the cost of labor and materials fluctuate.

Project selection and prioritization for FY 2022 and FY 2023 reflect the Administration's emphasis on working in partnership with local communities and users of national forests, investing in projects that will address climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, and ensuring project benefits include improving access and opportunities for Tribes and underserved communities. The Forest Service will continue to learn and adapt its project selection process as implementation efforts continue.

The Agency appreciates the recent investments through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to support additional work on our transportation network and recreation sites. The IIJA funding provides much needed additional resources for investments in infrastructure, such as for aquatic organism passage and road access to address wildfire risk reduction, that are complementary to GAOA's deferred maintenance funding.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

Originally created in 1964, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provided opportunity for the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and partners to create a network of conserved lands supporting healthy ecosystems and a high quality of life for local communities. The LWCF is fully supported by revenue from federal oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, with \$900 million authorized annually. Originally created for a limited number of years, the fund was permanently reauthorized in 2018 with the passage of the GAOA.

The Forest Service operates two separate programs supported by the LWCF, the Land Acquisition Program and the Forest Legacy Program. The Land Acquisition Program allows the Forest Service to expand public lands to improve public access and protect natural heritage. The Forest Legacy Program is administered by the Forest Service in partnership with State agencies to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases.

Strategic implementation of the Land Acquisition Program and the Forest Legacy Program furthers the Administration's implementation of the America the Beautiful Initiative, which is a call to action to work collaboratively to conserve and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife that support and sustain the nation. These programs and the focus of this Initiative will secure the abundance, resilience, and accessibility of these natural resources.

Land Acquisition Program Implementation

Since 1964, the Forest Service has acquired approximately one million acres of land using LWCF funding through the Agency's Land Acquisition Program. All Land Acquisition Program conservation projects are selected using a merit-based, two-stage, longstanding competitive process. The evaluation process is based on standard, nationwide criteria, including whether projects have demonstrated local community support; provide recreation access; protect watersheds and mitigate climate change; and provide species habitat. The most heavily weighted criterion is recreation access. In the first stage of the review process, proposals are evaluated and ranked regionally. In the second stage, each region submits its prioritized list to a national review panel comprised of experts in each of the criteria areas. The result is a nationwide prioritized list of major projects proposed in the President's Budget request to Congress.

On the priority list, the larger, individually proposed projects are known as “core” projects. The project list also includes separate requests for smaller projects by type, such as recreation access, wilderness, and inholding.

The Forest Service has completed nine of its FY 2021 “core” and recreation access projects. One FY 2021 project of note is the Lolo Trails project, which permanently protected 14,800 acres of important fish and wildlife habitat as well as public recreation access to the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. These lands are historically and culturally significant areas for both the Nez Perce Tribe and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation. While providing permanent public access to extraordinary recreation, the acquisition also precludes development west of the rapidly growing city of Missoula, Montana, and protects incredible wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity.

Forest Legacy Program Implementation

The Forest Legacy Program works in partnership with State agencies which receive grants to protect environmentally important privately-owned working forest land from conversion to non-forest uses through conservation easements or land purchases. Since its creation, the Forest Legacy Program has conserved 2,926,785 acres in 51 states and territories. We should also note that the Subcommittee’s Chairman and Ranking Member’s heavily forested home states of Maine and Montana are two of the leading states when it comes to participation in the program, which is reflected in their ranking first and third for total acres conserved and also lead the nation with the highest levels of federal investment. Forest Legacy projects share more than 5,000 miles of boundary with federal, state, and private conservation lands. Nearly 1,000 of those boundary miles are shared with National Forest System lands. Over the life of the program, the Forest Service has invested \$960 million into these projects, with an additional \$1.12 billion contributed by partners.

Projects are selected through a two-part competitive process – state-level and then national-level. The state level process ensures each project has local support and aligns with state priorities; and the national-level project selection process considers defined environmental and economic benefits, strategic contribution to other conservation initiatives on the landscape, and likelihood of conversion to non-forest uses. For FY 2023 consideration, the Agency received 44 applications from 28 states with a total request of \$249 million.

One of the highlights of the FY 2021 Forest Legacy Program awarded projects is the Montana Bad Rock Canyon Project. This fee acquisition project covers 772 acres and protects water quality, important fish and wildlife habitat, and will provide free public recreation access. This project safeguards vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, Endangered Species Act-listed threatened species found on the property, with the bull trout migrating into Canada to spawn. A trail will run through the property to allow access for hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, and other recreationists. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks will manage public access to preserve wildlife use, and timber management will sustain important habitat components of the property. The project is adjacent to a stronghold of public lands and adds to a 12,000-acre network of conserved riparian land along a 43-mile reach of the Flathead River.

These investments will improve public access by funding strategic land acquisitions, support locally led conservation efforts and protect our natural heritage. It will also create jobs, expand access to the outdoors, and help address climate change through protecting natural resources. These outcomes are replicated in investments in communities and states across the country, thanks to the enactment of the GAOA.

This concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.