



Empowering all to enjoy, share, and preserve the hiking experience

U.S. Department of the Interior
Submitted via Federal eRulemaking Portal
[Docket ID: DOI-2021-0008-0002](#)

Re: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through Recreation Opportunities

On behalf of American Hiking Society (AHS) and the 57 million strong hiking community we thank the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) for the opportunity to participate in the public listening sessions and submit comments on how DOI can advance racial equity and support for underserved communities through recreation opportunities as part of its implementation of Executive Order 13985, *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*.

Organizational Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Mission

At AHS, we envision a world where everyone feels a sense of belonging in the hiking community and has lasting access to meaningful hiking experiences, be that in urban, frontcountry, or backcountry settings, including on DOI trails. At our core, we are a community of hikers, or more simply, a community of people who more broadly share a love of foot (or assisted) travel outside along paths, trails, sidewalks, and more. However, we know that being able to move freely outside is not an opportunity available to all communities. Issues of systemic oppression, including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, bigotry against LGBTQIA-2, and more, have prevented individuals and communities from readily having financial and proximity access to hiking and trails, feeling safe and welcome while hiking, and seeing their identities and values reflected in the hiking community and outdoor industry. To ensure we are truly moving toward our vision where everyone feels a sense of belonging in the hiking community, it is our responsibility to understand and address historic and current barriers, disadvantages, and mistreatment experienced by people as they hike or consider hiking. It is our responsibility to serve as a catalyst for positive change in service of a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive (JEDI) hiking community.

We are committed to this work because it's simply the right thing to do. First and foremost, embracing JEDI will help us innovate, be resilient, and do our best work with a thriving workforce and thriving constituencies. Further, doing our best work also means that we are reaching, listening to, and representing the entire hiking community, especially those who have previously not felt welcome or heard in the hiking world. We believe the strength of the hiking community is dependent upon every hiker being seen, heard, and valued. Finally, we simply believe that everyone—and not just the privileged few—should be able to access the benefits of hiking, including health and healing, fostering connections with nature, and building community.¹ These commitments should also be held by DOI.

American Hiking Society is a longstanding partner through co-operative agreements with DOI agencies, including NPS and BLM, to promote volunteerism and recreation on trails. In recent years that programmatic work has included a focus on expanding access to the outdoors for underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected individuals.

¹ American Hiking Society, Our Commitment to All Hikers, <https://americanhiking.org/about-us/#our-commitment>.

Questions for Discussion

How can DOI remove or reduce barriers (e.g., update policies, practices, or programs) that underserved communities and individuals may face when they recreate or attempt to recreate on DOI-managed lands and waters?

The recommendations below are not exhaustive in addressing the ways in which DOI can advance racial equity. In everything DOI does, underserved communities and organizations representing these communities, must be centered in this work.

DOI should conduct frequent and ongoing outreach starting at the initial planning stages to build partnerships with organizations representing underserved communities. DOI should listen to the needs of those communities through targeted consultation and engagement and establish common goals and common understanding of the issues and barriers DOI is seeking to address. The listening sessions and request for comments to implement Executive Order 13985 is a positive first step that should occur in all aspects of DOI's work.

Issues and barriers for hikers could be addressed by: prioritizing new or maintained trails and outdoor spaces near or more easily accessible to underserved communities; identifying financial and transportation barriers to accessing DOI sites, including fees and access to reliable transportation; amenities for larger group gatherings, increasing the hiring of DOI staff that reflect the more racially diverse visitors; adding interpretive signage in multiple languages and that includes a complete view of history and Indigenous presence; renaming problematic trails or other spaces that are offensive in nature; and using Indigenous names, in consultation with tribes, for trails and other locations.

Increased support for organizations representing or working with underserved communities through additional grant funding, co-operative agreements, and partnerships will also help to address needs of these communities by supporting those best equipped to respond to community needs.

How can DOI establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities? What are the best ways to notify and engage underserved stakeholders about recreational opportunities?

Making information as easy to find and access as possible and meeting communities where they are is important in engaging underserved stakeholders. In order to better share information with underserved stakeholders DOI can create an inclusive information sharing and sign-up process, making program and services information as easy to find, understand, and complete as possible. This can include making programs and services easy to find online, ensuring the participation process is succinct and understandable (including providing materials in multiple languages), offer support for completing documents to participate in programs or receive services, and identifying needs that underserved stakeholders may have while participating in programs (lodging, dietary restrictions, cultural needs, hygiene, gear and apparel, etc.). Partnering with underserved communities from the beginning in the development of programs and services, including through the notification and engagement process, is critical.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. For additional information, please contact Tyler Ray, Senior Director for Programs and Advocacy, tray@americanhiking.org.