



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

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Submitted via Federal eRulemaking Portal
[Docket ID: FSA-2021-0006](#)

Re: Request for Information: Identifying Barriers in Programs and Services; Advancing Racial Justice and Equity and Support for Underserved Communities

On behalf of American Hiking Society (AHS) and the 44 million strong hiking community we thank the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the opportunity to submit comments on how the USDA can advance racial justice and equity for underserved communities 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 USDA Forest Service 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 the USDA.

American Hiking Society is a longstanding partner through co-operative agreements with the USDA Forest Service to promote volunteerism and recreation on Forest Service 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>.

Area Sections Addressed:

- Customer Experience Question 3
- General Questions 5 and 6

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

Customer Experience Questions

3. How can USDA, its cooperators, grantees, and partners, better share information with underserved stakeholders about our programs and services? What are the best ways to notify and engage underserved stakeholders about new programs and services or changes to existing services?

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 USDA 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.

General Questions

5. How can USDA establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities?

USDA should conduct frequent and ongoing outreach starting at the initial planning stages of the process to build partnerships with organizations representing underserved communities. USDA 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 USDA is seeking to address.

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 USDA Forest Service land, including fees and access to reliable transportation; amenities for larger group gatherings, increasing the hiring Forest Service 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.

6. Please describe USDA programs or interactions that have worked well for underserved communities. What successful approaches to advancing justice and equity have been undertaken by USDA that you recommend be used as a model for other programs or areas?

In its formation of the 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge (Trail Challenge), the Forest Service was intentional at looking at the Trail Challenge through an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens in its development and implementation, including engaging with organizations representing underserved communities. Through this effort, the Forest Service has indicated that resources will be developed for the agency and partners to implement equity, diversity, and inclusion principles in trail stewardship work and when communicating with the public.² As a NGO partner in this work, AHS found this type of approach to be beneficial in engaging with and meeting the needs of underserved communities.

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.

² USDA Forest Service, 10-Year Trail Shared Stewardship Challenge, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/10YTC>.