



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

November 29, 2023

## **Statement in Support of EXPLORE Act (Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act) Sections**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of American Hiking Society and the 59 million strong hiking community who enjoy the trails and green spaces in their communities and across public lands, we write in support of the committee's consideration of the *EXPLORE Act*, and the sections highlighted below, which will support hikers, trails, public lands, and the outdoors by expanding outdoor recreation access and bringing much needed improvements to public access of these spaces.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sections 112 (Identifying opportunities for recreation) and 132 (Improved recreation visitation data)**

American Hiking supports and applauds the efforts to expand recreation opportunities on public lands (Sec. 112) and prioritize outdoor recreation data collection (Sec. 132).

### **Section 121. Biking on Long-Distance Trails**

We commend the committee's commitment to increasing access to quality outdoor recreation activities for all user types. We thank the committee for its commitment to ensuring enjoyable use by all user types by including language in Section 121 to address potential conflict avoidance by directing the Secretary to ensure that the identification of long-distance bike trails do not conflict with an existing trail use.

### **Section 156: Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (Outdoors for All Act)**

Section 156 would establish under law the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Program administered under the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Since its establishment in 2014, ORLP has made progress in expanding access to outdoor spaces for urban areas and low-income communities. The permanent authorization of this program is needed to ensure that our nation's natural spaces are available and accessible to all hikers, especially communities of color whose access to and inclusion in outdoor recreation have been disproportionately negatively impacted by geography, socio-economic status, and other factors. ORLP is a must to ensure that our nation's trails, public lands, parks, and open spaces are accessible for all communities for generations to come.

### **Sections 221-224. Military and Veterans in Parks**

American Hiking supports the efforts to expand access for Servicemembers and Veterans (Sec. 221-224). These provisions will help to improve the experience of all hikers and guide future opportunities for the hikers, trail users, and all recreation users on public lands.

### **Subtitle C- Youth Access (Sections 231 and 232)**

Prioritizing access to the outdoors is critical for the health and wellness of our nation's youth and will foster a lifelong love of public lands and inspire the future stewards of these spaces. In particular, the

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<sup>1</sup> Sections not included in the letter don't indicate opposition.

extension of the Every Kid Outdoors Act will ensure that this successful program will continue to provide fourth graders and their families access to public lands and eliminate a potential financial barrier that may prevent families from recreating on public lands.

**Various Sections (Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act (SOAR Act))**

The SOAR Act sections will make world-class and close-to-home outdoor experiences more accessible by updating the permitting system that guides and outfitters need to operate trips across public lands. The SOAR Act will increase opportunities for guided recreation on public lands by improving the outfitter-guide permitting systems of the federal land management agencies. By expanding guided recreation, Congress can provide more opportunities for first time visitors to experience public lands in a positive way and help develop lifelong connections to the outdoors.

**Sections 322: Online Purchases and Establishment of a Digital Version of America the Beautiful–The National Parks and Federal Recreational Passes**

Improvements to online access for payment of entrance fees, passes, and recreation permits and the creation of a digital pass will expand access and improve accessibility of federally managed lands for all users, especially new users who have contributed to increased visitation in the last few years. We applaud the committee's efforts to modernize the visitor experience to bring our public lands into the 21st century.

**Section 353: Interagency Report on Special Recreation Permits for Underserved Communities**

Section 353 will ensure all communities are benefiting from the outdoor recreation opportunities provided by special recreation permits. Special recreation permits often give hikers, other recreation users, and visitors to public lands their first experience in the outdoors through guides, outfitters, and organized group trips. Identifying ways that special recreation permits can more effectively serve communities that have historically lacked or been denied access is essential in realizing an outdoors for all. Specifically, this section would study the barriers that recreation service providers operating in or providing services to underserved communities face when accessing our public lands recreation permitting system, and how to best improve the current permitting process to better facilitate access for recreational service providers serving diverse communities, including underserved and low-income individuals.

We thank the subcommittee for holding this important hearing and urge prompt consideration by the full committee and on the house floor.

Please contact Tyler Ray, Senior Director for Programs and Advocacy, [tray@americanhiking.org](mailto:tray@americanhiking.org) with any questions or for additional information.

Sincerely,



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American Hiking Society