

April 30, 2024

The Honorable Mike Simpson  
Chair, Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

**Re: Support for Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recreation funding**

Dear Chair Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree,

The undersigned organizations, representing the outdoor recreation community and the outdoor industry, write in support of strong funding for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) recreation programs in Fiscal Year 2025. Years of stagnant or declining funding for recreation management, coupled with a significant increase in recreation visits over the past two decades, has left both agencies unable to keep pace with the recreational use occurring on public lands. Investing in the USFS and BLM will help land managers provide sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities to the American public, steward our nation's public lands, and provide critical support to local and national outdoor recreation economies. Specifically, we request that Congress provide:

- \$100 million for BLM Recreation Resources Management
- \$70 million for USFS Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, with a commensurate increase to National Forest System Salaries & Expenses.

In recent decades, outdoor recreation has grown considerably in popularity, diversity, and economic importance. Nationally, outdoor recreation contributed \$1.1 trillion to America's economy in 2022, accounting for 2.2% of GDP.<sup>1</sup> These economic benefits are particularly pronounced in local communities in the vicinity of recreation opportunities on public lands. In fact, recreational activities on BLM lands contributed \$11.1 billion to the economy and 73,000 jobs in 2022,<sup>2</sup> while spending by visitors to national forests and grasslands contributes about \$13.7 billion to the US economy and sustains about 161,000 full-and part-time jobs.<sup>3</sup> Investing in both agencies' recreation programs will help maintain and build on this economic growth and will provide a significant return on investment for recreation economies in the vicinity of public lands.

Despite the growth in outdoor recreation, both BLM and USFS have seen declines in recreation funding over the past two decades accounting for inflation. This trend creates a funding deficit that directly impacts the visitor experience. Parking issues, trash, unwanted fire starts, erosion, and other maintenance issues have all become more common across these public lands, sometimes in a way that creates a significant public safety issue. In some cases, even partner-led efforts to complete recreation infrastructure projects, such as trail systems, are delayed for years due to lack of capacity by agency staff to complete project planning. Moreover, the cost-of-living in many public lands gateway communities

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 23-54, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022 (2023).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, The BLM: A Sound Investment for America 2022 (2023).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey Results National Summary Report, Data collected FY 2018 through FY 2022 (2023).

has increased dramatically in recent years, and some districts have been unable to fill recreation-related positions due to inadequate pay rates and cost-of-living concerns, particularly around housing. Investing in these agencies' recreation programs will help fill this capacity gap, improving the visitor experience and enabling partner organizations to better invest time and resources to benefit America's public lands.

Over the past decade, federal public lands have benefited from historic investments from Congress through the Great American Outdoors Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act. Both BLM and USFS are currently in the process of putting these funds to good use through a wide range of beneficial projects. While significant, these funds are not a substitute for adequate discretionary funding to support staffing and other basic needs of the agencies. Investments in the base recreation programs of both USFS and BLM will help ensure that mandatory dollars are expeditiously put into action to benefit the American public.

Our requests are outlined in more detail below.

### **BLM FY25 Request: \$100 million for Recreation Resources Management**

The Recreation Resources Management subactivity is the BLM's primary account for providing sustainable recreation opportunities to the American public. Funds for this account help the agency provide for a wide variety of recreational experiences, ranging from front-country developed camping, to trail-based activities, to technical activities like climbing or whitewater paddling. For all of these recreational opportunities, funding for Recreation Resources Management supports the planning, infrastructure, maintenance, and staff capacity necessary to provide a high-quality visitor experience. Importantly, these funds also support trails and water-based recreation opportunities, including BLM's extensive Wild & Scenic River system and the National Trails System, including National Recreation Trails.

Despite overseeing more lands than any other federal land management agency, BLM's recreation funding has historically lagged considerably behind other agencies.<sup>4</sup> Since 2006, BLM has seen a 25% reduction in appropriations for Recreation Resources Management adjusted for inflation. Over a similar time period, visitation to BLM lands has increased 46%,<sup>5</sup> and the number of full-time equivalents working under Recreation Resources Management has decreased by 25%.<sup>6</sup> This chronic underfunding—which has been trending in the wrong direction—creates a significant deficit in the agency's ability to address ever-increasing levels of recreation use.<sup>7</sup>

In 2023, the BLM released a new national recreation strategy: the Blueprint for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Outdoor Recreation.<sup>8</sup> The Blueprint outlines a bold vision for meeting the needs of the American public and commits to shifting how the agency addresses recreation management—moving from a reactive to a proactive approach—while retaining core aspects of the BLM recreation experience. Importantly, the Blueprint commits to growing the agency's recreation program to meet rising recreation demand and

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-21-592, Federal Lands and Waters: Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation Is Limited (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Visitation data are derived from BLM Public Lands Statistics Annual Reports 2006-2022.

<sup>6</sup> Funding levels and FTE data are derived from BLM budget justifications for FY06-FY23. Inflation values were estimated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator with values set to October 2023 dollars.

<sup>7</sup> See, Gwendolyn Aldrich and Evan Hjerpe, *The Conservation Funding Crisis*, Conservation Economics Institute (2022).

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Recreation and Visitor Services, *The Bureau of Land Management's Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation*, Washington, DC (2023).

embracing partnerships with local governments, stakeholders, and Tribes to enhance recreation resources on BLM lands. While the Blueprint represents an important step forward, significant investments from Congress are needed to realize the benefits of a modern BLM recreation program.

**Forest Service FY25 Request: \$70 million for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, with a commensurate increase to Salaries & Expenses.**

The Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness budget line item is the foundation of the USFS’s recreation program. Funds from this account are used to manage and maintain recreation sites like campgrounds and trails, rehabilitate recreation infrastructure, improve visitor use monitoring, and manage special use authorizations. The program also enables the USFS to manage and protect heritage sites and to steward the USFS’s network of 451 Wilderness areas and 130 Wild & Scenic Rivers.

An increase to Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness is necessary to address inflation and cost-of-living for USFS employees and to account for a significant increase in recreational visits to USFS lands over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2020,<sup>9</sup> funding for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness decreased 23% accounting for inflation,<sup>10</sup> while recreational visits increased 17%.<sup>11</sup> Over the same time period, the agency saw a 29% reduction in full time equivalents for its recreation program.<sup>12</sup> While recreation visits have decreased somewhat following the Covid-19 pandemic, overall visitation to national forests remains high.

Importantly, our request includes a commensurate increase to Salaries & Expenses in order to account for recreation staffing needs. USFS employees are the backbone of the agency’s recreation program, and the agency needs significant resources to rebuild its workforce, improve employee retention, and account for inflation. An increase to Salaries & Expenses is critical for addressing these workforce challenges.

Like the BLM, the USFS is actively working to modernize its recreation program. The agency is planning to release an updated national recreation strategy—Reimagine Recreation—in 2024, which will chart a strategic path forward for improving workforce development, public communications, and planning to provide sustainable recreation opportunities on national forests. We look forward to working with the USFS to advance the vision outlined in Reimagine Recreation, and we encourage Congress to provide the funding necessary to make this vision a reality.

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Thank you for considering our request for the FY2025 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. We stand ready to work with the USFS and BLM to support sustainable recreation opportunities on our nation’s public lands.

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<sup>9</sup> In FY21, the USFS restructured its budget to include a new Forest Service Operations discretionary appropriations account and several salaries and expenses budget line items. This restructuring, known as “Budget Modernization,” makes it difficult to compare FY21 and beyond to historical levels.

<sup>10</sup> Historic funding levels are derived from USFS budget justifications.

<sup>11</sup> Visitation estimates are derived from Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) National Reports and represent 5-year estimates of National Forest visits.

<sup>12</sup> Recreation FTE data are derived from USFS budget justifications.

Sincerely,

Outdoor Alliance  
American Alpine Club  
American Hiking Society  
American Mountain Guides Association  
American Rivers  
American Whitewater  
Appalachian Trail Conservancy  
Back Country Horsemen of America  
California Mountain Biking Coalition  
Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association  
Conservation Lands Foundation  
International Mountain Bicycling Association  
Latino Outdoors  
Lowelifes Respectable Citizens' Club  
The Mountaineers  
National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance  
NEMO Equipment, Inc.  
Next 100 Coalition  
Outdoor Industry Association  
Pacific Crest Trail Association  
Partnership for the National Trails System  
Peak Design  
PeopleForBikes  
Public Land Solutions  
REI Co-op  
Runners for Public Lands  
Sage Trail Alliance  
Sierra Business Council  
Smith River Alliance  
Surfrider Foundation  
Vertical Supply Group/Sterling  
Washington Trails Association  
The Wilderness Society  
Winter Wildlands Alliance