

**STATEMENT OF RANDY MOORE, CHIEF OF THE USDA FOREST SERVICE
TO THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS
Regarding
S.3551, Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act
May 11, 2022**

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service, regarding S. 3551, the Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act.

The USDA Forest Service manages 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands, comprising 193 million acres in 41 states and Puerto Rico. Outdoor recreation is a significant use of these lands, which contain three million acres of lakes, 400,000 miles of streams, 122 Wild and Scenic Rivers for rafting, kayaking and other watersports, and 159,000 miles of trails for horseback riding, hiking, snowmobiling, mountain biking, and more.

The Forest Service is deeply committed to connecting all Americans to the outdoors, and the agency values the important role played by gateway communities as partners in connecting visitors to recreation opportunities in the national forests and grasslands. Outdoor recreation attracts people to visit, live, and work in gateway and rural communities and supports the health, well-being, and economic vitality of those communities. Recreation on National Forest System lands contributes more than \$13.5 billion to America's gross domestic product and supports more than 161,000 full- and part-time jobs, the vast majority of which are in gateway and rural communities.¹

Moreover, recreation on National Forest System lands sustains more private sector jobs than any other Forest Service program and provides the greatest economic stimulus for many local communities adjacent to or within the National Forest System. Outdoor recreation opportunities and amenities are consistently ranked as one of the primary reasons people move to rural towns and can be a leading contributor to small town economies.

In fiscal year 2020, the number of recreation visits to the National Forest System rose to 168 million, which represents a 12% increase compared to 2019. Annual visitation to national forests and grasslands increases to 450 million visitors if we account for the number of people who pass through these beautiful forests on scenic roads and byways. Recreation pressure has been particularly significant on national forests close to urban areas. Congestion at very popular sites has increasingly become an issue, even at some dispersed recreation sites.

Section 3 of this bill would require USDA to select five national forests for a pilot program to make visitation data available to the public, including data and resources publicly available from

¹ 2020 National Visitor Use Monitoring survey. These numbers reflect total benefits (direct, indirect, and induced).

existing nongovernmental platforms. The bill would allow the data to be provided directly by the agency or indirectly through its partners. Within five years of enactment, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior would be required to select an additional 80 units for this program. Section 3 also would require the Secretaries to share information about lesser-known recreation sites through a variety of media platforms to disperse visitation among recreation sites.

The Forest Service currently collects visitor use data and monitors trends in visitor use annually through the National Visitor Use Monitoring program and makes these visitation data publicly available on its website. To the extent this bill would require the agency to provide real-time visitor use data to the public, the agency would like to work with the bill sponsor to address technical concerns. USDA would like to work with the Subcommittee and bill sponsors to better understand the visitation data requirements in Section 3 and to make technical improvements to the bill.

Section 4 seeks to enhance understanding of the economic impacts of visitation on gateway communities and to identify the needs of those communities, such as housing and other infrastructure necessary to accommodate and manage growing levels of visitation. The bill would require the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to seek to meet the identified needs through a variety of mechanisms under existing law, such as financial assistance, cooperative agreements, and public-private partnerships.

USDA recognizes the important role and needs of gateway communities in sustaining the recreation economy. We are helping to invest in community wellbeing, grow the outdoor recreation economy, and enable equitable access to the outdoors. Recently, we partnered with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Northern Border Regional Commission to launch the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities program, which provides planning assistance to help rural communities leverage outdoor recreation as an economic development strategy. USDA Forest Service, Rural Development, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture are also collaborating to target the recreation economies of rural forest gateway communities, providing technical expertise and funding to develop recreation infrastructure and capacity beyond the boundaries of the National Forests. We have identified a strong need to engage across boundaries in more comprehensive recreation planning to identify sustainable solutions to the growing demand for outdoor recreation on public lands.

USDA supports the goals of S. 3551 to improve visitation data, provide better information about the wide range of available recreation opportunities, and work in partnership with gateway communities to undertake comprehensive recreation planning. We would welcome an opportunity to work with the Subcommittee and bill sponsors to improve upon the current legislation in support of these goals.