



**Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Hearing on Deferred Maintenance on Federal Lands
June 18, 2019 at 9:30 a.m.; 366 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

**Statement for the Record
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable**

Dear Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin and Members of the Committee:

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) is the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations – now totaling 27 members, representing more than 50,000 American businesses. Together, we represent an industry that makes up 2.2 percent of United States Gross Domestic Product, supports 4.5 million American jobs and contributes \$734 billion in economic output, surpassing other sectors such as petroleum, coal, and computer and electronic products. Federally managed lands and waters host more than one billion visits annually and are essential to outdoor recreation. However, a growing maintenance backlog means much of the infrastructure is inadequate at best, unsafe at worst. This hurts not only the outdoor recreation industry, but also the millions of visitors and communities that rely on this industry to survive.

This hearing represents an extraordinary bipartisan opportunity to explore how we can improve the infrastructure within our beloved National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Bureau of Land Management, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federally managed lands and waters. We thank the committee for your interest and leadership on this issue and for including these agencies in this discussion.

Sadly, much of the infrastructure that outdoor recreation depends on — including roads, trails, marinas, campgrounds and more — is worn-out or desperately in need of renovation and expansion. We have Eisenhower-era recreation foundations at a time when visitors need safe roads and bridges, accessible trails and campgrounds, clean water and 21st century amenities. This situation calls for a national commitment to the grey, blue and green infrastructure on our public lands and waters. The entire recreation business community is ready to work with you to ensure that the next century of our public lands system lives up to — or surpasses — the esteem and glory of its first.

Visitation to our public lands and waters has continued to increase. However, insufficient appropriations have contributed to a growing deferred maintenance backlog, negatively impacting visitor experiences and affecting the local communities that rely on them. More than \$1 billion of the \$11.9 billion backlog in our National Parks is attributed to recreation assets such as campgrounds, marinas and more than 18,000 miles of National Park System trails. While the NPS holds the largest share of the overall \$18 billion backlog, all four major land management agencies face mounting deferred maintenance backlogs that jeopardize outdoor recreation access, enjoyment, safety and the associated economic benefits for the rapidly growing community of outdoor recreation enthusiasts.

When domestic and international visitors recreate on our public lands, they should be awed by the natural beauty of the great outdoors, not disappointed with the recreation infrastructure that supports runners, hikers, bikers, climbers, anglers, paddlers, campers, boaters, RVers, snowmobilers, off-road vehicle users and more. We commend the sponsors of the bipartisan Restore Our Parks Act for offering a thoughtful solution to this growing problem. **ORR urges the immediate passage of this legislation to address the deferred maintenance and repair backlog** of not just our National Parks, but the other federal land and water management agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and the USFS.

ORR also fully supports adequate appropriations for agency maintenance budgets and programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund. We recognize the increased appropriations to these accounts in the past few years and it is critical that appropriations continue in this direction. However, these recent increases are not enough to address the multi-billion dollar backlog that has accrued over decades. That's why we support new federal investment to maintain our shared public lands and waters, as well as key policies that effectively prioritize resources and facilitate public-private partnerships to help ease the maintenance backlog and significantly enhance the visitor experience.

The benefits of expanding and improving the outdoor recreation economy are clear and compelling. When visitors participate in outdoor recreation, they spend their hard-earned money on gear, equipment, food, lodging and more, and contribute \$65.3 billion in annual tax revenue to federal coffers. Much of America's recreation infrastructure on federally managed lands and waters is also associated with revenue streams — fishing and hunting licenses; entrance and activity fees; campground, slip and boat launch fees; recreation permits and registration fees; and excise and fuel taxes. We are already paying to play and want to work with the federal government to harness and utilize the full revenue potential of these private contributions — paired with public dollars — to adequately address the severity of the problem to our industry now and into the future. Additionally, I will outline five ideas that don't require new federal funding.

- 1) Recognize high-use and revenue generating assets — such as campgrounds and boat ramps — in the capital allocation model. Visitors do not want to pay fees for sites in

disrepair. When these types of assets continue to accumulate as part of the overall deferred maintenance backlog, money that could have otherwise been spent on maintenance projects is effectively left on the table and the government is losing out on an important revenue generation opportunity that could help alleviate the maintenance backlog at these sites and in adjacent areas. Land management agencies should have the opportunity to harness the revenue generation potential of popular sites by identifying units or assets that attract visitation and fee collection and prioritize improvements to these important recreation areas.

Public-private partnerships also hold the potential to serve as an effective tool to augment public financing for maintenance projects. Requiring federal agencies to submit requests to the public to operate, improve, or fund outdoor recreation assets with insufficient funding prior to closure — unless there is an imminent health or safety threat — would provide opportunities for businesses, nonprofit organizations, volunteers, concessioners, and other government and private entities to provide continued access to these sites. This would also discourage the practice of prematurely closing underfunded outdoor recreation assets to keep them off the backlog.

- 2) Ensure user pay-user benefit within the Recreational Trail Program (RTP). Funded by a federal tax on off-highway vehicles, RTP provides funding to states to develop and maintain trail infrastructure. The Federal Highway Administration estimates that the program is funded at a quarter of the amount—\$85 million annually—that off-road vehicle users pay into the Highway Trust Fund (\$270 million annually). Congress needs an accurate estimate of what this user group is paying into the pot of money that funds RTP so we can ensure the appropriate amounts are returned to recreation infrastructure projects, and to help inform future national infrastructure legislation. This bipartisan legislation requires a study to determine the best available estimate of off-highway recreation fuel taxes paid into the Highway Trust Fund, creating an accurate resource for Congress to determine appropriate funding for the program.

RTP is a user-pay, user-benefit program that serves as the primary funding mechanism for thousands of motorized and non-motorized trails. We are paying into the system and look forward to working with Congress on opportunities to solve our trail infrastructure needs by ensuring that monies collected from the off-highway vehicle tax are going back to trail maintenance through RTP.

- 3) Promote 21st Century Conservation Service Corps to rebuild recreation infrastructure. With the establishment of the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) as part of the Natural Resources Management Act of 2019, Congress recognized the need to address infrastructure projects through cost-effective partnerships with Corps. We encourage you to continue this focus and make the additional investments necessary to carry its intent forward and put more young adults and veterans to work on the thousands

of unmet needs on our public lands.

We encourage you take into account how Conservation Corps can leverage limited federal resources in partnership with land and water management agencies and ensure these cost-effective public-private partnerships continue. By partnering with Corps, agencies achieve more with their budgets and accomplish cost-effective projects to help address the multi-billion-dollar maintenance backlog; remediate wildfires and invasive species; improve access to public lands; build and maintain multi-use trails and increase recreation opportunities and ensure productive fish and wildlife habitat for enthusiasts, hunters, and fishers.

Corps provide a critical and cost-effective labor force for projects that address deferred maintenance. They utilize RTP funding and source project work from various operations, maintenance, and construction accounts at land management agencies. The Corps should be utilized and prioritized on a wide variety of public land and water projects to better leverage limited taxpayer funds and develop the next generation infrastructure workforce.

- 4) Elevate successful models of innovation and public-private partnerships. As boating and RV camping on our public lands and waters continues to grow in popularity — with outdoor recreation as the top economic driver on USFS lands — maintenance, infrastructure and inventory needs have not kept up with the demand. Inadequate campgrounds and marinas limit access to outdoor recreation opportunities and negatively impact the visitor experience. Unfortunately, many federal campgrounds were constructed more than 60 years ago, and campsites are often overcrowded, small, unlevel, and lacking electric hookups, adequate bathrooms and more. This has all led to reduced RV camping opportunities on federal lands. RV overnight stays at National Park Service campgrounds have declined from 4.5 million in the 1980s to 2.5 million in 2018. At the same time, state parks, private campgrounds and the RV industry as a whole have reported significant growth. In 2018, NPS visitors spent over \$20 billion in rural towns and cities near park sites and provided a total boost of \$40 billion to the U.S. economy. Many rural communities often act as gateways to national parks and forests and depend on visitors for their livelihood. Modernized and expanded RV camping opportunities extend park visitors length of stay, which in return will bring additional jobs, tourism and commerce into these rural communities.

ORR members have dozens of examples showcasing how modernized campgrounds and marinas can improve recreation experiences. We also have a vision for the future that accounts for growing and changing recreational activities and the infrastructure needed to engage the next generation of enthusiasts.

It is imperative that as we look at the maintenance backlog and recreation improvements, we are building infrastructure and programming needed for diverse and high-quality customer experiences in the years to come. Rather than just improving campgrounds to what is necessary today, we need to take examples from the RV Industry Association and Campgrounds of America's partnership on the "RVX Campground of the Future" to understand what recreation will look like in twenty to thirty years. This will ensure we are preparing for electric vehicles, a completely connected future generation, the need for sustainable water and sewage systems and much more.

Beyond federal investments, enhanced concessioner and public private partnerships can help tackle these issues and eliminate the \$78 million in campground infrastructure deferred maintenance. New revenue generating experiences and facilities can be offered to the public, including extended shoulder and non-peak seasons; dynamic fee categories reflective of improved campsites and services ranging from WiFi to RV utility hook-ups; rental availability of RVs, yurts, cabins, and outdoor recreation equipment, gear and more. These new ideas can be utilized to generate additional revenue for deferred maintenance, drive rural prosperity and provide enhanced visitor experiences.

5) Fully implement current authorities.

- a. *Institutionalize conservation finance models* —ORR stands ready to work with Congress on pilot projects, like the conservation finance model that supported a mountain biking trail in Wayne National Forest. Private conservation financing can help alleviate deferred maintenance while also modernizing and marketing recreation assets like campgrounds, trails, fishing programs and more.
- b. *Utilize recent Farm Bill authority that connects outdoor recreation to rural economies and forest restoration projects* — Recent Farm Bill report language presents the opportunity to approach forest restoration projects with a recreation lens and identify places where multiple objectives can be met and where the agencies can more directly consider how restoration and recreation projects should be considered as the USFS designs priority restoration projects. Projects that better integrate the mutual objectives of recreation and restoration into their scope of work help USFS recreation outcomes and tight budgets.

The longer systemic deferred maintenance continues, the more challenging it will become for the Department of the Interior and the USFS to manage public lands and waters in a way that maximizes opportunities for recreational and conservation activities. New government data shows that outdoor recreation is among our nation's leading economic sectors and growing faster than the economy as a whole. However, improved access, infrastructure and permitting are crucial to ensuring that the full economic potential of the outdoor recreation industry is realized, and that our lands and waters are managed sustainably so future generations can enjoy these outdoor experiences as much as we do today.

As Congress tackles our nation's infrastructure challenges, outdoor recreation businesses need to be at the table. Comprised of the leading trade associations covering the breadth of the outdoor recreation landscape, ORR stands ready to partner with this committee and Congress to provide contemporary and thoughtful solutions that will improve the health and vibrancy of communities and economies across the country. We look forward to working with you on opportunities to advance our grey, blue and green infrastructure by incorporating a recreation title in any infrastructure measure moving forward and furthering the discussion on strategic improvements that will preserve sustainable recreation opportunities for future generations, while updating infrastructure and access for the 21st century user community. Investments in outdoor recreation today are an investment in American jobs, the economy and the enjoyment and stewardship of America's iconic public lands and waters for years to come.

Thank you for your attention to this issue. We look forward to working with you to achieve a historic and important step forward for places all Americans cherish.

Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script, which appears to read "Jessica Wahl".

Jessica Wahl
Executive Director
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable