

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Legislative Hearing on Outdoor Recreation
Thursday, October 31st, 2019 at 10:00 a.m.
366 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Testimony in support of:

S.1967, the Recreation Not Red Tape Act (Wyden)
S.1665, the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act (Heinrich);
and S.1723, the Ski Area Fee Retention Act (Gardner)

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

I'm honored to have the opportunity to provide testimony in support of three important bills which work together to create and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences for all Americans. While I currently lead the Outdoor Recreation Economy Initiative for Oregon State University, the testimony and views expressed and here are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of Oregon State University.

Background and Perspective:

I believe that the biggest issue and threat facing our public lands and waters in America today is that our youth are not consistently experiencing and building a relationship of care with the outdoors. If the next generation, who represent our future workforce, leaders, volunteers, taxpayers, and voters do not understand and appreciate the value of our public lands and waters they likely will not vote in the future to protect, maintain, and promote these incredible places, which represent a core component of the character of living in our beautiful country.

*"No one will protect what they don't care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced."
-- Sir David Attenborough, Broadcaster and Naturalist*

The Outdoor Recreation Economy represents the future of natural resource-based jobs in America, contributing visibly and positively to the health and happiness of our people, to community engagement, to the development of stewardship values, and to our citizen's interest in lifelong learning and exploration of the natural world. Thanks to the work of several members of this committee, and the passage of the REC Act in 2016, we now know the size and impact of the outdoor recreation economy, representing 2.2% of our GDP, growing faster than our economy, and supporting over 4.5 million jobs. My professional work with, and commitment to the Outdoor Recreation Economy spans fifteen years and is rooted in countless personal experiences recreating on our public lands and waters.

Currently, I work for Oregon State University (OSU) leading their Outdoor Recreation Economy Initiative. OSU's Outdoor Recreation Economy Initiative (OREI) was launched to help the University understand how it might productively work with the industry associations, companies, public agencies, and related organizations in this economy to provide value, help spur growth in this sector, and simultaneously promote social, environmental, and economic progress all in alignment with OSU's values, mission, and strategic plan.

Through OREI we are focused on understanding and responding to the workforce development needs of outdoor industry companies, public agencies, and the nonprofits groups and associations that support our work. In order to ensure we understand the future workforce needs of the economy, we work closely with well-organized industry associations, like the [Outdoor Recreation Roundtable](#) which represents more than 50,000 outdoor industry companies, retailers, manufacturers, and guides, and also with Agency leaders and Nonprofits across America.

In the year ahead through the OSU Outdoor Recreation Economy Initiative we plan to pilot innovative educational programs which will support public-private sector cohorts of students to address key workforce challenges faced by the business, organizations, and agencies in the outdoor recreation economy.

Previous to working with OSU, I served as the Executive Director of the Mazamas in Oregon, a nonprofit education organization whose mission is to inspire everyone to love and protect the mountains, and which was founded as Oregon's Mountain Club in 1894 on the summit of Mt. Hood. While working for the Mazamas I had the opportunity to lead and work on several projects which I believe relate strongly to the hearing and bills we are considering today.

In 2016-17, I, along with Adam Baylor on our staff at Mazamas, led and coordinated the advocacy efforts to create Oregon's office of Outdoor Recreation (HB3350), and Oregon's Outdoor Recreation Day (HB2143). We also built and staffed the Oregon Outdoors Coalition, a private sector lobbying coalition that works to ensure that outdoor recreation is celebrated and sustained as an integral part of the state's identity, culture, and economy.

At that same time I served on the Roadmap to the Outdoors Initiative, led by First Gentleman of Oregon Dan Little, which was (and continues to be) a working partnership between the Governor's office, State & Federal Agencies, and community groups with a goal of increasing the quality of life of all Oregonians by fostering an appreciation of Oregon's natural wonders by increasing access to the outdoors for everyone.

I also joined and continue to serve on the leadership team for Travel Oregon's Outdoor Recreation Initiative. The Oregon Outdoor Recreation Initiative is a statewide effort to bring together businesses, agencies, land managers, conservation groups and recreational user groups around the goal of expanding access to outdoor recreation and increasing the economic impact and sustainability of Oregon's tourism and outdoor recreation economy.

And finally, in 2018, I had the opportunity to serve on the Oregon Delegation to the Outdoor Recreation Confluence Accords meetings. My specific role at those meetings, along with my friend, industry colleague, and former legislative staffer for Senator Wyden, Erin Gaines, was to draft the pre-ambule to the Confluence Accords.

To quote the Confluence website: "The Confluence Accords embody 12 principles contained in the four pillars of conservation and stewardship, education and workforce training, economic development, and public health and wellness. They were developed in 2018 by the Confluence of States, a bipartisan group of eight trailblazing states, to promote and advance best practices for all states to consider.

The original Confluence Accord signatories were outdoor recreation directors from the states of Colorado, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming on behalf of their governors. There are now 16 states with offices of outdoor recreation or task forces created or under development following recent legislation."

The pre-amble we drafted for the Confluence Accords represents a clear statement of why this work is important:

We, a growing confluence of states with a shared passion for the outdoors and a commitment to cultivating a strong outdoor recreation economy, believe that outdoor recreation is core to the very character and quality of life we should all enjoy.

The outdoor industry is a powerhouse of meaningful job creation, and a driving force of our Nation's economy. Our industry is an economic multiplier, creating a unique quality of life in rural and urban areas, attracting new businesses and professional talent to our communities.

While each of our states is unique, our shared commitment to facilitating everyone's love of place through inclusion and diverse outdoor experiences has the power to unify communities, to bridge societal divides, and to improve the mental and physical health of all people.

The outdoors is the wellspring of adventure, camaraderie, and solace, inspiring us to both explore new places and set down roots. Whereas nature is the backbone of the recreation economy, we are committed to fostering conservation and stewardship values, ensuring environmental quality, and restoring sustainable access to the outdoors for current and future generations.

Recommendation for Priority Strategies to enhance the Outdoor Recreation Economy in America:

It is clear, from reading these bills, and reviewing previous committee proceedings and hearings that the ENR committee members and staff are highly aware of the problems and issues facing the outdoor recreation economy, and today we are talking about several pragmatic solutions we can enact immediately to address these issues.

The situation we are faced with often seems overwhelmingly complex, and because of that complexity, I believe we need a roadmap or a strategy map to guide our work, both on these bills and to in the years to come. I've organized my thoughts and testimony around the most common issues and strategies that I've heard over the years, many of which relate directly to the bills before us today.

I strongly support each of the bills we are discussing today because together they make real progress in many of these areas. At the risk of being audacious, I propose the following list of strategies as a priority list for how to approach enhancing the outdoor recreation economy in America. This list should be further evaluated, but I think a national level strategy document that looks something like this would be highly effective if adopted and funded:

- ⇒ **Prioritization:** Make Outdoor Recreation a Priority for our agencies and encourage States to do the same.
- ⇒ **Agency Staffing and Training:** Create accountable, full-time, agency positions to lead and coordinate this work.
- ⇒ **Permit Reform:** Improve Access for Guiding and Educational groups through Permitting Reform.
- ⇒ **Planning and Managing for Recreation:** Invest in adaptive management and planning systems for Recreation.
- ⇒ **Special Recreation Areas:** Bolster existing designations to help managers prioritize recreation & speed up permits.
- ⇒ **Infrastructure:** Invest in Modern Infrastructure and World Class Destination Development.
- ⇒ **Private Sector Partnerships:** Engage service corps & affinity groups to build and maintain special recreational facilities.
- ⇒ **Ease of Access for All:** Make it easier to find, reserve, and obtain passes, especially for youth and veterans.
- ⇒ **Digitization:** Digitize and modernize agency information systems.
- ⇒ **Rural Communities:** Re-invest in the Rural Communities that service, support, and provide SAR for recreation

Specific Recommendations:

Prioritization:

Make Outdoor Recreation a Priority for our agencies and encourage States to do the same: These actions, which I strongly support, and which are well represented in the RNR Act are among the most important things we can do to move this work forward and enhance the outdoor recreation economy in the future.

In the 20th Century, outdoor recreation was known as what we did with our leftover time and money. Going forward, we need our agency leaders and staff to understand the incredible benefits that recreation provides to our people's mental and physical health, to jobs, to community engagement, to their interest in lifelong learning, and in developing stewardship values so that our citizens want to care for and protect our public lands and waters.

First and foremost, we need to encourage all fifty states to install State Offices of Outdoor Recreation, and to task these new Directors with not only coordinating the outdoor recreation economy in their state, but helping other state agency leaders to prioritize and promote the importance of outdoor recreation to our people, places, and economies. A stretch goal for consideration would be to direct a small portion of LWCF funds to create a matching grant or fund that incentivized the creation of these offices, and/or which enabled agencies like the National Park Service to support and bolster the work of these state offices of outdoor recreation with additional full time staff.

Next, we need to add outdoor recreation as a priority to the mission statements of our land management agencies, including the Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, FERC, and the Department of Transportation; and encourage the same among similar state agencies. A great example of why this is important is to consider that the Army Corps of Engineers manages more recreation visitors in a year than any other land management agency, and while recreation may be a note in their management plans, it's not a clearly stated focus of their work.

And finally, if we hope to incentivize our land managers to be innovative, efficient, and to invest in modern solutions to enhance the outdoor recreation economy we need to ensure that their job performance and evaluations are linked to goals that support outdoor recreation directly.

Agency Staffing:

Create accountable, full-time, agency positions to lead and coordinate this work: Our land management agencies, and the National Park Service in particular, should be funded and empowered to lead the work of enhancing and supporting the outdoor recreation economy nationally and regionally, rather than holding it back. Dedicated, full-time staff whose job performance metrics are tied directly to recreation metrics (and without embedded or cultural conflicts of interest) are key to moving much of the work forward that is described in the RNR Act and the SOAR Act.

Additionally, our land management agencies are, like many long-standing institutions, facing an impending retirement wave with nearly two thirds of the current workforce eligible for retirement in the next five years. This reality means that our agencies need to invest more than ever in training and knowledge transfer so that our future land managers can learn from our senior staffers before they retire. The RNR Act states the importance of providing adequate staffing for our land management agencies, which I strongly support, but we also need to ensure that staff training, and this transfer of knowledge is prioritized and funded.

Permit Reform:

Improve Access for Guiding and Educational groups through Permitting Reform: For over ten years, while working for the Mazamas, I managed and helped to process all of that organization's permits with local, state, and federal land management agencies. The most complex and difficult permit to administer was Mazamas USFS special use outfitting and guiding permit on Mt. Hood National Forest and in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, which at that time was the largest single outfitting and guiding permit held in Oregon by a significant margin.

The permit application was due annually and was often 50-75 pages long. Additionally, in most years it took the USFS over 6 months to respond to the permit application, and up to another year to reconcile and send us a bill for our permit fees. One year we were told that all of our 120+ leaders and guides would be required to have a full copy of the paper permit application and related documents at all times – meaning a hiking or climbing guide was expected to literally carry over 100 sheets of paper on all activities. Experiences like these, and others encouraged me to start advocating for changes to the permit system roughly ten years ago.

To say that I support the permit reform provisions in the SOAR Act, and in the RNR act would be an understatement. These changes are sorely needed and will help not only existing outfitters and guides but many new and entrepreneurial businesses that simply want to get youth and diverse populations outside. The permit reform language in the bill can be generally understood as being in two categories:

First, process changes that reduce the costs and barriers to applying for and obtaining a special use outfitter and guide permit. The bill language streamlines permit processing, offers more short-term and temporary permits, and offers the transfer of unused user days to other organizations, all of which will help new and small organizations get started guiding on public lands. And finally reducing total permit costs and cost-recovery fees related to getting a new permit will encourage and enable many more organizations to apply for permits.

And Second, process changes that make it easier to maintain, administer and keep a permit once an organization has an approved permit. Multi-jurisdictional permits, where organizations only need to work with one agency should make it much easier to manage many permits. Extending permits, adding flexibility to how the approved user days can be used, and requiring faster and reliable response times from agencies should have a strong positive impact.

I believe that these permit process improvements as seen in both the RNR and the SOAR are some of the most important steps we can take to improve access to recreation for everyone to the outdoors. Both the need and demand to get future generations outdoors, and to facilitate shared growth experiences for families, school groups, and community organizations continues to rise. Our current permitting systems and processes turn away and inhibit innovative groups from gaining access to our public lands, to starting and growing their businesses, and to getting new and diverse populations outside.

Planning and Managing for Recreation:

Invest in adaptive management and planning systems for Recreation: The RNR Act supports adaptive management and flexibility in planning for recreation by extending seasonal recreation opportunities, and by encouraging the public to participate in outdoor recreation year-round. A real and significant side benefit of extending seasonal activities is that it will allow us to transition more seasonal jobs into full time annual positions, and to more regularly support adjacent rural economies.

And finally, I believe we should encourage and incentivize a design thinking approach to recreation planning that focuses our attention on the user experience when visiting public lands and waters. University graduate students and/or local design firms could be engaged to help define a future vision for our recreational infrastructure that accounts for all of the complexities.

Current planning processes, often done by committee and without strong, visionary leadership often take extraordinary lengths of time to complete, and result in less than inspiring outcomes, and they tend to favor past practices rather than look to the future. I believe congress should consider directing a portion agency or LWCF Funds to support modern and coordinated Recreation Planning.

Special Recreation Areas:

Bolster existing designations to help managers prioritize Recreation and speed up permits. Given the positive impacts and importance of the outdoor recreation economy to the health of our people, to the resiliency of our communities, and to the future of natural resource-based jobs, congress should have more tools available to protect public lands and waters where recreation is the highest value and use of a place.

The majority of our public lands are managed under a multiple-use mandate, but some areas are so special they should be called out specifically for the recreation opportunities they provide. Designating recreation areas would align goals, resources and performance measures in a way that ensures recreation thrives will protecting the land, water and habitat that drive the outdoor recreation economy.

Steps like creating a National Recreation Area system and designation as defined in the RNR Act will not only provide a much-needed new tool but will also simplify and add efficiency to the permitting process in these areas. We need to continue to take strategic actions like those in the RNR act to improve our agency's ability to be flexible, and adapt to changing recreational needs and uses.

It is also important to note that we're not talking about creating new Wilderness Areas or "Light" versions of those designations. NRA's give us an opportunity to create front country areas that not only allow for appropriate integration of resource extraction and motorized activities but that celebrate and promote these values of our public lands. A great example to consider would be a hut-to-hut mountain biking trail system that not only stopped by agritourism facilities (farms, wineries, etc.) but also stopped into a local sawmill or wood products manufacturing facility that showcased how our forests contribute to our economy in many ways.

Infrastructure:

Invest in Modern Infrastructure and World Class Destination Development: The outdoor recreation economy in America is not only growing, but it is also changing fast. We can expect more interest and participation in outdoor recreation each year, and we know that very little of our current infrastructure was built with 140+million people participating in 11.6 Billion annual outings in mind. Additionally, the way people recreate is shifting with changes in technology, modes of recreation, and with climate change. So, as we consider how to address the nearly \$20 Billion backlog of maintenance faced by our land management agencies, we will obviously need to make some hard decisions about how and where to invest in our infrastructure.

I believe strongly that instead of focusing the narrative on "fixing the backlog" that we need to start talking about how to invest in and build an infrastructure that supports the future of our outdoor recreation economy. We need to strategically invest in future-forward solutions that are adaptable, flexible, and resilient to changes in the

environment and in modes of recreation. We need to be smart, and use available performance data, market research tools, and design-thinking as we decide where to invest our limited resources in infrastructure. And we need to invest in creating consistent, high quality user experiences regardless of whether a trail or waterway crosses a boundary. The RNR Act provisions on Priority Trail Maintenance are an example of this type of thinking and are a step in the right direction.

Private Sector Partnerships:

Engage service corps and affinity groups to build and maintain special recreational facilities: Private sector partners, like the conservation and service corps can effectively do much of our trail and landscape stewardship work for less than half the cost of using agency personnel or contractors and meet established quality standards for the work. Additionally, many special interest user groups (mountain bikers, snowmobilers, hikers, etc.) are very willing to invest in and volunteer to help build out the recreational infrastructure they believe is needed.

These partners are often ready and willing to do more of the work each year but navigating the permit and liability processes can inhibit their ability to grow programming. For example, in Oregon there are currently only a few organizations that can easily setup & run volunteer stewardship trips because it's so difficult and expensive to get the administrative support, insurance, and training needed. We quite simply need more people doing this work to address the backlog and to build for the future, and the volunteer provisions in the RNR Act are a great step forward.

Ease of Access for All:

Make it easier to find, reserve, and obtain passes, especially for youth and veterans: There are many existing private sector and agency pilot programs that are already working to make it easier for everyone to obtain recreation passes, make reservations, and pay user fees. There are also specific examples of pilot programs working to effectively get our youth and veterans outside, and even put them to work in the outdoors. Most notably our service and conservation corps provide entry level work opportunities in the outdoors for disadvantaged youth all across the country.

The Recreation Not Red Tape supports this strategy in several important ways. Making recreation passes more available, and available for purchase online and on our phones is an obvious and important step forward. The RNR act also works to make sure that all passes, state and federal are available together and consistently across vendors. And finally, the SOAR act removes key access and liability barriers for schools, city and county recreation departments, and state funded universities.

Finally, it is worth saying that our veterans and returning service members have fought to protect our country, and it seems obvious that when they return home they should have easy access to our public lands and water - the very places they fought for. We also have clear research and data from the Greater Good Science Center showing the health and healing benefits of time outside, and how outdoor experiences can help veterans re-engage in their community, find solace, and reconnect with the country they fought to protect. For these reasons and more I strongly support the RNR Act and specifically the recommendations to the Secretary of Defense to provide information, options for outdoor activities, and jobs in the outdoors for our veterans and returning service members and their families.

Digitization:

Digitize and modernize agency information systems: As was mentioned in previous hearings this calendar year on Recreation in both the House and the Senate, our land management agencies need help to digitize records on landholdings, easements, and even some long-standing permits and agreements. In order for us to efficiently move towards having interconnected recreational lands and waters and creating more guided experiences we need to empower our agencies with readily available and searchable data sources.

Rural Communities:


Re-invest in the Rural Communities that service, support, and provide SAR for recreation: A broad issue facing the future of the outdoor recreation economy in America is the decline in the health and resiliency of our rural economies. Because of urbanization, and the changing nature of work in America, many rural communities have less resources than ever to support visitors, provide services, and respond to safety and rescue issues that naturally will arise as people flock to nearby public lands and waters.

Seemingly far-fetched solutions like investing in regional airports and hospitals, broadband Wi-Fi, and access to outdoor recreation out your doorstep has helped iconic towns like Bend, Oregon grow quickly and provide a potential model of success for our rural economies. Quite simply, people are moving to bend because of access to outdoor recreation, and because Bend has a hospital, airport, and great Wi-Fi which enables people to live there and work remotely.

If we want to see the outdoor recreation economy continue to grow, we will need to reinvest in these rural communities. Many of our agency staff members and state tourism departments have the skills to help to provide technical assistance to rural communities so they can begin to plan for the future. Encouraging more states to form offices of outdoor recreation as listed in the RNR Act, and looking for ways to support rural technical assistance are great steps towards providing guidance and support for rural communities that wish to grow a local or regional outdoor recreation economy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of these Recreation Bills. If there is anything I can do to help going forward or any follow up questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

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- End of Testimony

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Outdoor Recreation Economy Graphic

