

United States Senate, Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Testimony of:
American Hiking Society and the Trails Move People Coalition

Introduction

Founded in 1976, American Hiking Society is the only national nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering all to enjoy, share, and preserve the hiking experience. We envision a world where everyone feels welcome in the American hiking community and has permanent access to meaningful hiking, including urban, frontcountry, and backcountry opportunities. American Hiking Society works with Congress and federal agencies and empowers the millions-strong hiking community to shape public policy and legislation. Our efforts ensure funding for hiking trails, the preservation of natural areas, and expansion of access to and inclusion in outdoor recreation.

This testimony is also submitted on behalf of the Trails Move People Coalition. The member organizations of the new Trails Move People Coalition represent millions of Americans who spend their time, money and energy to get out on trails for fun and to volunteer. The Coalition strives to elevate the prioritization of trails by developing funding and research resources so that everyone, irrespective of geography, mode of recreation, socio-economic status or experience, will have access to more and better trail opportunities and in turn more fulfilling personal experiences outside.

Importance of Trail Funding for Public Land Access

Trails are the gateway to fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, camping, climbing, and more. A failure to maintain and manage our nation's trails limits access for all communities, stymies economic growth, and reduces opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation.

Access to open spaces for recreation has been shown by many studies to improve physical and mental health and to increase quality of life.¹ Additionally, outdoor access is crucial for children, impacting their physical and mental development, socialization skills, and a lifelong appreciation of nature.² Trails bring those health benefits to all by providing individuals of diverse backgrounds access to our public lands for all types of outdoor recreation.

Newly-released data from the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) calculated that outdoor recreation generated \$778 billion in economic activity in 2017, surpassing other sectors such as agriculture, petroleum and coal. Outdoor recreation makes up 2.2% percent of U.S. GDP, supports 5.2 million jobs and is growing faster than the economy as a whole.³

We already know that outdoor recreation has a massive positive impact on our nation's economy and that much of that impact is generated via trails. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, trail-centered

¹ American Hiking Society, Health Benefits of Hiking, <https://americanhiking.org/resources/health-benefits-of-hiking/> (last visited 1/27/2020). See also Harvard Medical School, *Exercising to Relax*, Updated July 13, 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/exercising-to-relax>.

² Harvard Health Publishing, *6 reasons children need to play outside*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/6-reasons-children-need-to-play-outside-2018052213880>.

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation*, <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation> (last visited January, 24 2020).

activities directly generate over \$594 billion⁴ and nearly 3.5 million jobs⁵ annually. On federally-managed land, outdoor recreation contributes more than \$64.6 billion to the national economy and supports more than 623,000 jobs annually.⁶

Most people would be surprised to learn that citizen volunteers and nonprofit trail organizations perform a large share of the maintenance on our nation's trails, in partnership with government agencies and with the support of private donations. Since our founding in 1976, American Hiking Society has mobilized 558,708 trail volunteers to construct and maintain 41,146 miles of trails on federal and state public lands at a value of over \$108 million in labor.⁷ This ongoing public "sweat equity" investment has led to an increased recognition of the importance of adequate federal funding for our public lands and trails in order to maintain quality visitor experiences.

It is the trails community's collective belief that Congress must restore to our federal land management agencies proper appropriated funding levels, reversing the cuts made over the past few decades. We believe that restored and adequate funding is not only desperately needed but fully warranted. We expressly thank this subcommittee in recent years for leading congressional efforts to provide incremental increases in funding that benefits trails and the hiking community.

We encourage the Committee to adopt the following funding requests so the federal government can continue to benefit from private contributions and volunteer labor as well as provide inexpensive, healthy outdoor recreation options for your constituents and all Americans.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Funding

Recommendation: Full funding at \$900 million

Full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million is a must to ensure that our nation's trails, public lands, parks, and open spaces remain protected and accessible for generations to come.⁸ The LWCF has funded nearly 1,000 trail projects and thousands of other projects ranging from National Parks and Forests and Wildlife Refuges, to community parks and ball fields in all 50 states. LWCF funded the completion of the Appalachian Trail, major segments of the Pacific Crest Trail, and sections of at least ten other scenic and historic trails, totaling over 50 different projects.

The LWCF and the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (OLRP) have made progress in expanding access to outdoor spaces for urban communities. Continued support of the OLRP program through appropriations funding, and congressional passage of the Outdoors for All Act (H.R. 4512), is needed to ensure that our nation's natural spaces are available and accessible to urban hikers, especially urban communities of color whose access to and inclusion in outdoor recreation have been disproportionately negatively impacted by geography, socio-economic status, and other factors.

⁴ OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY 18 (2017), available at https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA_RecEconomy_FINAL_Single.pdf. Trail centered activities generated \$594,311,835,880 from retail spending, salaries, and federal and state taxes.

⁵ Id. Trail centered activities create 3,476,845 jobs.

⁶ OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY 15 (2017), available at https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA_RecEconomy_FINAL_Single.pdf; "Forest Service Makes it Easier for Visitors to Enjoy National Forests and Grasslands." U.S. Forest Service, <https://www.fs.fed.us/news/releases/forest-service-makes-it-easier-visitors-enjoy-national-forests-and-grasslands>.

⁷ American Hiking Society, <https://americanhiking.org/> (last visited Jan. 24, 2020).

⁸ American Hiking Society also supports passage of the LWCF Full Funding Act (H.R. 3195) to provide full and dedicated funding for LWCF. We express our appreciation to the Chair and five additional members of the subcommittee who have co-sponsored this legislation.

Trail Maintenance

Our public lands face a nearly \$21.5 billion maintenance backlog. When annual maintenance needs go unaddressed, long-term problems arise, seriously hampering the public's access to outdoor recreation. Closed trails, out-of-service restrooms, campgrounds in poor conditions, and impassable roads are only a few of the barriers that hikers face. In turn, local economies that rely on trail recreation suffer. As of 2018, 193,138 miles of trails on federal lands had an estimated \$886 million maintenance backlog. In order to both address the deferred maintenance backlog and keep pace with annual maintenance needs, additional funding for our nations trails is critical.

Forest Service

Recommendation: Fund Capital Improvement and Maintenance, Trails budget at \$100M

The Capital Improvement and Maintenance, Trails line item in the Forest Service budget funds construction, reconstruction and maintenance of trails, including by non-profit partners through co-operative agreements. National Forest trails benefit everyone and receive increasing public use each year. Collectively, the National Forests provide 157,000 miles of trails for activities ranging from hiking, biking, horseback riding, off-highway vehicle usage, groomed winter trails for cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, and access points for "river trails." Yet this trail system is increasingly stressed, and maintenance cannot keep pace with the growing demand due to inadequate funding. The lack of maintenance threatens public access to National Forests and could endanger the public safety if funding does not keep pace with public visitation. Funding at \$100 million will allow the completion of annual maintenance needs and begin addressing the trail maintenance backlog.

Bureau of Land Management

Recommendation: Creation of Trails Line Item in BLM Budget

The BLM manages 13,468 miles of trails over 245 million acres —more than any other federal land management agency. Most of the country's BLM-managed public land is located in 12 Western States, including Alaska, and contains a diversity of landscapes that often provide the public less structured but nonetheless diverse recreational opportunities. BLM recreation resources and visitor services support strong local economies. More than 120 urban centers and thousands of rural towns (comprising 64 million people) are located within 25 miles of BLM lands.

However, unlike other federal land managers, BLM does not have an individual funding line item for trails. This results in inconsistent funding for trail maintenance and construction year-to-year and a lack of clarity on how trail funding will be allocated. A trails line item in the BLM budget (including at least \$10M for National Scenic and Historic Trails) will address the fragmented funding allocations across sub activity accounts and create consistent funding for trails.

Recommendation: Fund National Conservation Lands at \$84M

National Conservation Lands comprise 35 million acres of some of our most treasured winding rivers, mountain vistas, national monuments, wilderness areas, and trails. The National Conservation Lands line item provides funding to enhance recreational access, conserve the Nation's heritage, and manage these nationally recognized resources for current and future generations. Funding at \$84M will help ensure that some of our most treasured BLM resources are preserved, maintained, and accessible for all types of recreational, cultural, and scientific usage.

National Park Service

National Parks, and the world-class experiences their 18,844 miles of trails provide, are one of the most unifying forces in America. Well-maintained trails improve the quality of visitor experiences and enhance visitor safety.

Recommendation: Funding for the Rivers, Trails, & Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program at \$13.478M

The RTCA program brings the expertise of over a century of land management to the greater recreation community. When a community asks for assistance with a project, National Park Service staff provide free critical tools for success, on-location facilitation, and planning expertise, which draw from project experiences across the country and adapt best practices to a community's specific needs. Funding at \$13.478M will ensure these trail planning services are made available to communities in all regions of the nation, including recreation programs for youth.

Recommendation: Funding for Park Service Operations for the National Trails System maintained at a minimum of \$17.014 M

The NPS has administrative responsibility for 23 National Scenic and Historic Trails established by Congress. Adequate funding is essential for keeping these popular trails accessible. The request will help the work of trail organization partners of the Park Service to build, maintain, and interpret these trails.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Recommendation: Funding for Refuge Visitor Services at least \$74.227M

Refuge Visitor Services provides funding for trail maintenance across FWS-managed land. Located in every U.S. state and territory, and within an hour's drive of nearly every major U.S. city, National Wildlife Refuges provide incredible opportunities for outdoor recreation, including hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, boating and nature photography across 2,500 miles of trails. More than 37,000 jobs are reliant on refuges. Funding at a level of \$74.227M will provide for trail maintenance across the land and water trails, refuges, wetlands, and hatcheries, including eleven National Scenic and Historic Trails and forty-four National Recreation Trails.

Conclusion

The nearly 1,000,000 square miles that comprise U.S. public lands are our most treasured natural, historic, and cultural resource. Whether you're a hiker enjoying the 193,500 miles of trail, a member of the indigenous populations for whom these lands are their ancestral homes, or one of the 145 million outdoor recreation users, our public lands are of incalculable value to hundreds of millions of Americans. As we all strive together to protect these lands and trails and make them accessible and welcoming to all communities for generations to come, Congress must do its part to ensure adequate funding.