

Testimony of:  
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**Introduction**

Chair Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of American Hiking Society and the 44-million-strong hiking community, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on the importance of adequately funding our nation's trails and public lands to ensure access for all. 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. Our efforts ensure funding for hiking trails, the preservation of natural areas, and expansion of access to and inclusion in outdoor recreation.

**Importance of Trail Funding for Public Land Access**

At a time when trail usage is at an all-time high with both new and returning users turning to the outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> support for trails and public lands are more important than ever. 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.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, outdoor access is crucial for children, impacting their physical and mental development, socialization skills, and a lifelong appreciation of nature.<sup>3</sup> Trails bring those health benefits to all by providing individuals of diverse backgrounds access to our public lands for all types of outdoor recreation.

Outdoor recreation has a massive positive impact on our nation's economy and trails generate much of that impact. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, trail-centered activities directly generate over \$594 billion<sup>4</sup> and nearly 3.5 million jobs<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> This ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Rails to Trails Conservancy, Using Trails and Outdoor Spaces Safely in the Wake of COVID-19 <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2020/march/24/using-trails-and-outdoor-spaces-safely-in-the-wake-of-covid-19/> (last visited April 13, 2021). See also Outdoor Industry Association, 2021 Special Report: New Outdoor Participant (Covid and Beyond), <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2021-special-report-new-outdoor-participant-covid-beyond/> (last visited April 13, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> American Hiking Society, Health Benefits of Hiking, <https://americanhiking.org/resources/health-benefits-of-hiking/> (last visited Apr. 9, 2021). See also Harvard Medical School, *Exercising to Relax*, Updated July 13, 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/exercising-to-relax>.

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY 18 (2017), available at [https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA\\_RecEconomy\\_FINAL\\_Single.pdf](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.

<sup>5</sup> Id. Trail centered activities create 3,476,845 jobs.

<sup>6</sup> OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY 15 (2017), available at [https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/OIA\\_RecEconomy\\_FINAL\\_Single.pdf](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>.

<sup>7</sup> American Hiking Society, <https://americanhiking.org/> (last visited Apr. 9, 2021).

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.

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

#### **Forest Service Recommendation:**

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.” Even with enactment of the Great American Outdoors Act, this trail system is increasingly stressed and annual maintenance cannot keep pace with the growing demand due to inadequate funding. Roughly 120,000 of the 159,000 miles of trails are in need of some form of maintenance or repair.<sup>8</sup>

**Fund Capital Improvement and Maintenance (CMTL), Trails budget at \$29.35M, including \$11.5M for National Scenic and Historic Trails** As trails use continues to increase along with annual maintenance needs, funding at \$29.35M will restore the highest funding levels since at least 2005.

**Within CMTL, Trails Increase Support for the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance Trail Stewardship Partner Funding** Volunteer groups and non-profit partners perform a large amount of agency trail work. The Forest Service has a successful Trail Stewardship Partner Funding challenge-cost-share program that uses nonprofit partnerships to leverage federal funding by 3 to 5:1. We encourage expanded support of this program within the CMTL, Trails line item. This funding can also significantly increase conservation corps work on trail systems.

**\$56.8M to fund Recreation, Heritage & Wilderness** The National Forests and Grasslands provide a great diversity of outdoor recreational opportunities, connecting the American public with nature in an unmatched variety of settings and activities. Funding at \$56.8M will restore funding to 2013 levels (minus estimated cost-share amounts), the highest since at least FY2005.

**\$100M to fund Legacy Roads & Trails as a separate line item** For FY2022, Legacy Roads & Trails should be reinstated as a separate line item in the USFS budget, with \$100M distinctly designated for urgently-needed road and trail repair, maintenance and storm-proofing, fish passage barrier removal, and road decommissioning, especially in areas where Forest Service roads may be contributing to water quality problems in streams and water bodies that support threatened, endangered or sensitive species or community water sources.

#### **Bureau of Land Management Recommendation:**

The BLM manages 13,468 miles of trails over 245 million acres —more land 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 recreational 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.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/news/releases/usda-forest-service-announces-challenge-increase-focus-problems-facing-nations>

**Trails Line Item, including at least \$10.5M for National Scenic and Historic Trails, with robust funding for BLM trails** The BLM has no specific account in its budget for funding national trails or trails in general. Designating a trails line item in the BLM budget will address fragmentation of funding allocations across sub-activity accounts and create consistent, predictable, and better-managed funding for trails.

**Fund National Conservation Lands at \$65.131M** National Conservation Lands funds enhance recreational access, conserve the Nation's heritage, and manage these nationally-recognized resources. We urge the committee to consider the additional demands for which BLM is responsible – and the increasing popularity of these lands – and provide a sharp increase in base funding for the National Conservation Lands, restoring program funding to its FY2006 level. Such an increase is needed to properly administer the system's expansion by 18 million acres since 2000, and will permit increased inventory, monitoring and protection of cultural resources, enhance proper management of all resources and provide a quality visitor experience. This should also include robust funding for National Scenic and Historic Trails, as recommended below.

**\$10.5M to fund National Conservation Lands- National Scenic Historic Trails, sub-activity Recreation Resources Management, including \$3.15M to operate Historic Trail Interpretive Centers**

At a minimum, include language that directs the Bureau to include unit-level allocations within major sub-activities for each of the scenic and historic trails — as the Bureau has done for the national monuments, wilderness, and conservation areas. The Bureau's lack of a unified budget account for National Trails or a trails line item prevents the agency from efficiently planning, implementing, reporting, and taking advantage of cost-saving partnerships and volunteer contributions.

**Restore BLM FTE staffing levels, including for trail management and maintenance** Across the board staffing shortages have significantly negatively impacted BLM's ability to complete its mission, including management and maintenance.

**Fish and Wildlife Service Recommendation:**

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 refugees. 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.

**Funding for Refuge Visitor Services at least \$79.973M** Funding at \$79.973M will restore funding to 2010 levels, the highest since at least FY2006.

**National Park Service Recommendation:**

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.

**Funding for the Rivers, Trails, & Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program at \$15M** 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 \$15M will ensure these trail planning services are made available to communities in all regions of the nation.

**Funding for Park Service Operations for the National Trails System maintained at a minimum of \$21M** The NPS has administrative responsibility for 23 National Scenic and Historic Trails established by Congress. Funding at \$21M within the Park Service Operations account for the National Trails System 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.

**Restore funding for Volunteers in Parks programs at a minimum of \$8M, including dedicated funding to the National Trails System** Volunteers in Parks leverages private donations with public funding to maximize trail maintenance resources. Dedicating funding to the National Trails System will obviate competition with large NPS parks for access to critical volunteer support in the form of trail maintenance crews and administrative management of individual trails.

**Restore funding for Visitor Services sub-activity, Youth Partnership Programs at a minimum of \$10.95M, including an acknowledgment of the benefits for trails** The Youth Partnership Program in part funds the Public Land Corps program, which provides education and work opportunities for youth aged 16-30. The NPS utilizes non-profit youth-serving organizations to perform critical natural and cultural resource conservation projects at NPS sites, ranging from masonry apprenticeships on historic structures to Tribal land improvements; to engaging other youth through coordination of culturally-based workshops and outdoor recreation clubs.

**Robust funding for Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Program, at a min \$125M in 2021** Robust funding for LWCF programs reflect the nation's outdoor recreation priorities. Maintain robust funding for ORLP, which expands close-to-home access for underserved communities at a minimum maintaining the FY21 \$125M appropriation.

#### **US Geological Survey**

**\$1.5M to fully fund the National Digital Trail Project (NDTP) of USGS** The USGS National Digital Trails project supports the Department of Interior's vision to "Increase access to outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans..." Full funding at \$1.5M will allow the USGS to provide critical information and research for our nation's trails, including a web-based interactive decision support tool (TRAILS) to improve connectivity between existing trails and trail systems, a nationwide digital trails database in the public domain, and a mobile application to provide trail maintenance information to land management agencies.

#### **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.