



Empowering all to enjoy, share, and preserve the hiking experience

April 17, 2023

**Letter for the Record: House Natural Resources Committee, Federal Lands Subcommittee
Hearing: Examining the Implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act and the Growing
National Park Service Deferred Maintenance Backlog**

**Re: National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund Has Improved Outdoor Recreation
and Public Lands Access for Hiking Community**

Dear Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and Members of the Federal Lands Subcommittee,

On behalf of American Hiking Society (AHS) and the 57 million strong hiking community we write in support of the impact that the Great American Outdoors Act National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) has had in improving outdoor recreation and public lands access for hikers across the country.

We ask the committee to support extending funding of the LRF and look forward to working with the committee to achieve the fund's intended impact in addressing deferred maintenance needs across federally managed public lands.

**Trails, Trail Bridges, and Trail Related Projects Have Benefitted from the LRF and Addressed
Deferred Maintenance**

Between 2021 and 2023, 432 trail, trail bridge, and trail related deferred maintenance projects have been funded through LRF across the Forest Service, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service.¹ Additional trail projects are also proposed for FY24. These trail projects and hundreds of other projects impacting the user experience directly benefit hikers and other trail users by ensuring our public lands remain open and accessible for all to use. Many of these projects are supported and completed by non-profit partners and volunteers that leverage the funding provided through the LRF, maximizing the impact of the fund.

Special recognition is warranted for the Forest Service in their approach to implementation of the LRF and the public outreach and partnership efforts undertaken to achieve the fund's goals to address deferred maintenance.² Through robust public engagement, transparency in the selection of projects, and robust project partnerships, the Forest Service is a shining example of how to maximize the limited funds available through the LRF to generate the biggest impact. The Forest Service has funded projects across 42 states, Puerto Rico, and all 9 Forest Service Regions.³

**Trails, Trail Bridges, and Trail Related Project Examples, as reported by Department of the
Interior and U.S. Forest Service:**

Utah (BLM), Color Country and Paria River District Recreation Site Repairs: Project funding of \$4.5M was provided to address repairs to recreation assets and trailheads at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Red Cliffs National Conservation Areas, and various campgrounds and recreation sites in Utah. Recreation asset repairs include water system repair, roof replacement, fence maintenance, and solar panel replacement to improve recreation site safety and visitor experience. Additional repairs to

¹ Data pulled from Forest Service and DOI databases. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/gaoa>; <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa-project-data>.

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/gaoa/partnerships>

³ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/49fb8e5fbfc44ec589dc92e4789b1c80?item=1>

transportation assets, including trail maintenance, bridge replacement, and road repairs, will improve visitor access to these popular public lands destinations.⁴

Idaho (Forest Service) Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, Lochsa Downriver Trail #2: LRF funding made it possible to accomplish needed trail maintenance work on the Lochsa Downriver Trail #2, improving the experience for future visitors enjoying the trail. The trail is a favorite for locals and visitors to the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests because it offers the beautiful scenery of the Lochsa River corridor and vantage points that look down on the Lochsa River and other pristine areas. Workers and supervisors from the Idaho Department of Corrections worked on the trail for 20 days to clear overgrown vegetation, repair footbridges, improve trail tread, and provide general overall maintenance. Partnerships were critical in completing this project, “They did fantastic work,” said Galen Sparks, GAOA Trails Program Lead, of the Idaho Department of Corrections crew that assisted the Forest Service in the trails work. “They were super eager to do quality work on our trails and helped to tackle those deferred maintenance projects.”⁵

Montana (near Idaho Border) (Forest Service), Bitterroot National Forest, Rock Creek Horse Camp: The LRF provided funding for the Developed Recreation Campground Maintenance & Accessibility Improvement Project on the Bitterroot National Forest which includes replacing faded and illegible recreation site signage, replacing deteriorating picnic tables, and replacing fire rings. This recreation site project improves the trail riding experience within the Bitterroot National Forest.

The Forest Service partnered with the Bitter Root Back Country Horsemen (BBBCH) on this project. BBBCH, established in 1976 as one of the first chapters in the nation, is invaluable. The BBBCH chapter annually contributes over 600 personal hours and 425 stock hours on project, primarily on the Bitterroot National Forest, to benefit all trail users and natural resources.⁶

Alaska (Forest Service), Chugach National Forest, Cordova’s Trails Updates: The Chugach National Forest has three distinct geographic landscapes, which is unique among national forests. The Copper River Delta, the Eastern Kenai Peninsula, and Prince William Sound attract adventurers and nature enthusiasts the world over and are once-in-a-lifetime destinations for a million visitors each year.

Cordova is a commercial fishing community in the Copper River Delta region and is home to the world-famous Copper River Wild Salmon. The Cordova Ranger District is nestled between the Copper River Delta and the southeastern end of Prince William Sound and covers approximately 2.3 million acres. Beauty and adventure surround this magnificent place.

LRF funding allowed for 1.5 miles of heavy trail reconstruction on the Henry Ridge Trail. This included 600 feet of netted step-and-run boardwalk, 40 feet of split log planks, a 15-foot staircase, 15 log steps, drain ditches, rock culverts and more. District employees are already hearing that the changes are noticed and loved by regular hikers in the area.⁷ The Henry Ridge Trail is a popular 4.1 mile trail that takes hikers through mature hemlock and spruce forests, muskegs, and to an open alpine area with stunning views of the surrounding mountains and the Copper River Delta below. From here, hikers can explore the alpine areas without following a defined path and gain views of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska. Popular with birders, salmon viewers, and those craving a near-town hike, this well-loved trail had some challenging areas that were tricky for hikers to negotiate.

⁴ <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa-project-data>

⁵ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/49fb8e5fbfc44ec589dc92e4789b1c80?item=1>

⁶ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/49fb8e5fbfc44ec589dc92e4789b1c80?item=1>

⁷ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/49fb8e5fbfc44ec589dc92e4789b1c80?item=1>

Iowa (Fish and Wildlife Service). Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge: LRF funding of \$10.6M was provided to construct office facilities and infrastructure at the Luster Heights, Iowa site to replace the mudslide damaged and unoccupiable facility in McGregor, Iowa. Displaced staff have been relocated to a temporary office in a GSA-leased building located in Prairie Du Chien, Wisconsin which is a considerable distance from the managed areas. Additional deferred maintenance work to be performed includes rehabilitating the associated parking areas, road, and dike repairs. The project will also include an ADA-compatible river overlook and improve trail access by connecting the property with existing trails in the Yellow River Forest.⁸

The Refuge was established in 1924 as a refuge for fish, wildlife and plants and a breeding place for migratory birds. The refuge encompasses one of the largest blocks of floodplain habitat in the lower 48 states. Bordered by steep wooded bluffs that rise 100 to 600 feet above the river valley, the Mississippi River corridor and refuge offer scenic beauty and productive fish and wildlife habitat. The Refuge covers just over 240,000 acres and extends 261 river miles from north to south at the confluence of the Chippewa River in Wisconsin to near Rock Island, Illinois. The Refuge is designated as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar) and a Globally Important Bird Area.⁹

Nebraska (Forest Service). Nebraska National Forest: Five Forest Service projects on the Nebraska National Forest have been funded through LRF. This includes one project that also leveraged funding from the Recreational Trails Program. These five projects will improve visitor access and recreational opportunities on the five Ranger Districts of Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands;¹⁰ further develop access to fisheries and recreational opportunities and reduce deferred maintenance through improvements and dam reconstruction, rehabilitation, and maintenance on three dams/fisheries on the Oglala National Grassland¹¹; replacing sidewalks that have become unsafe and in disrepair at the Bessey Recreation Complex and upgrading the electrical at Cedar Loop/Group Campground¹²; and road reconditioning, aggregate placement, and grading to improve visitor access and recreational opportunities on the Nebraska National Forest and Grassland.¹³

Oklahoma (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge: LRF funding of \$25.2M was provided to address deferred maintenance needs and is projected to reduce annual operations and maintenance costs by \$48.5M. The refuge provides 15 miles of hiking trails and other recreational activities including hunting, fishing, biking, birding, boating, climbing, and more. The project will also improve the recreation users' visitor experience through the renovation of the visitor center.

This project will co-locate and consolidate multiple facilities to improve efficiency, modernize transportation infrastructure, and demolish unnecessary infrastructure to eliminate the deferred maintenance backlog by an estimated \$18.3 million (this phase) and reduce the annual operating costs at Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge. The intent of the project is to plan, design and construct a 13,540 sf administrative headquarters building and a 12,000 sf multi-purpose maintenance/fire cache building, and 2,500 sf bunkhouse to replace inefficient and geographically dispersed facilities. In addition, this project will also include the cleanup of the abandoned Treasure Lake Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center site and the renovation of the existing visitor center. The energy efficient facilities will reduce annual operating costs and greatly increase logistical capabilities for administering natural

⁸ <https://www.waukonstandard.com/articles/2022/06/15/more-room-view-upper-mississippi-river-national-wildlife-and-fish-refuge>

⁹ <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/fv21-23-fws-gaoa-lrf-pdss-508.pdf> (pg. 78)

¹⁰ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2021-LRF-Projects.xlsx>;

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-06/GAOA-FY22-LRF-Projects.pdf>

¹¹ <https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/24d16d9786c44b24aba1281b71f10f46#projid=0207-FY21-2BI>

¹² <https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/24d16d9786c44b24aba1281b71f10f46#projid=0207-FY22-2EJ>

¹³ <https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/24d16d9786c44b24aba1281b71f10f46#projid=0207-FY22-2EJ>

resource protection and public use programs by providing centrally located office and meeting space for 31 permanent, seasonal staff, fire crew, and volunteers, and by providing secure and sufficient parking for employees and visitors. Individual projects addressed will incorporate proper ADA/ABA accessibility requirements.¹⁴

South Dakota (BLM), Eastern Montana District, Alkali Creek and Centennial Trail Creek Crossing: LRF funding was provided to support this project that replaces two unsafe recreation trail creek crossings to improve safe access to picnic areas and the 111 mile Centennial Trail. Two bridges will replace an existing culvert with a concrete ford that typically plugs and overtops, and the second will replace a log stringer bridge that is impassible during spring runoff. The existing culvert and concrete ford and log stringer are dangerous crossings for the public to navigate and replacing them reduces liability. By replacing the problematic culvert and concrete ford the BLM will be able to reduce the reoccurring maintenance.

Oregon (BLM), National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center Energy Conservation: LRF funding of 1.035M for this project will reduce deferred maintenance by over \$3.5M by reinsulating the exterior envelope of the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center exhibit building and removing and replacing the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems at the exhibit building. The project will modernize aging infrastructure and reduce annual maintenance costs. This will allow visitors exploring the Oregon National Historic Trail an improved experience. The project will also support 353 jobs and provide \$37.7M in economic contributions.¹⁵

Puerto Rico (NPS) San Juan National Historic Site: LRF funding of \$8.2M to stabilize the cliff at San Fernando Bastion, which forms part of the foundation and support for the Castillo's esplanade. It corrects safety issues with falling rocks above a popular urban recreational trail. Sections of the cliff face were stabilized in the 1990s, but untreated sections continue to deteriorate requiring park personnel to temporarily close the trail. This project will address untreated sections building on the work that was completed in prior years. The west shore of Castillo San Felipe Del Morro is badly exposed to gravitational erosion caused by wind, constant rain, water salinity, and wave action. In 2012, repeated episodes of torrential rain caused a rockslide at San Fernando Bastion. Loose debris, including large boulders, catapulted down the slope to land beside the Paseo del Morro National Recreational Trail directly below.¹⁶

Increased Annual Funding is Required to Fully Address Deferred Maintenance Backlog

Annual maintenance needs of federal land managers outpaces annual appropriations funding resulting in the continued growth of deferred maintenance. Fully addressing deferred maintenance and stopping further backlog growth require a congressional commitment to providing adequate annual funding to federal land management agencies.¹⁷

For additional information, please contact Tyler Ray, Senior Director for Programs and Advocacy, tray@americanhiking.org.

Sincerely,

Tyler Ray
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¹⁴ <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/fy21-23-fws-gaoa-lrf-pdss-508.pdf> (pg. 1)

¹⁵ [https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/docs/2022-01/2021-GAOA-Oregon-110521%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/docs/2022-01/2021-GAOA-Oregon-110521%20(1).pdf)

¹⁶ <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/project-data-sheets-for-the-national-park-service.pdf> (Pg. 11)

¹⁷ Public Witness Testimony from American Hiking Society and 194 trail organizations in support of robust funding for trails. <https://americanhiking.org/advocacy/194-trail-organizations-and-partners-voice-support-for-federal-trail-funding-house-of-representatives/>