



March 31, 2023

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Chair  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
731 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Sen. John Boozman, Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
555 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Rep. Glenn Thompson, Chair  
Committee on Agriculture  
400 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Rep. David Scott, Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture  
468 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

**Re: Outdoor recreation and the 2023 Farm Bill**

Dear Chairs Stabenow and Thompson, and Ranking Members Boozman and Scott,

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, the outdoor industry, and conservation-minded businesses, we write to share our perspectives on supporting rural economic development, conservation, and outdoor recreation through the 2023 Farm Bill.

The Farm Bill has a long history of supporting rural economies, working lands, and communities through conservation, forestry, and rural development programs. Outdoor recreation is increasingly an important economic sector for rural communities, having contributed \$862 billion in gross economic output to the U.S.

economy in 2021, accounting for nearly 2% of U.S. gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> The 2023 Farm Bill is an opportunity to further enhance support for this sector and ensure sustainable management of natural resources.

The 2018 Farm Bill acknowledged outdoor recreation explicitly via conference report language recognizing the importance of the outdoor economy and clarifying that rural development funds can be used for “recreation businesses, facilities, infrastructure, planning, and marketing.”<sup>2</sup> This language sets an important precedent for addressing recreation programs via the Farm Bill, which Congress can expand on in 2023.

The recommendations below highlight Farm Bill programs that either directly or indirectly support outdoor recreation, either through investments in recreation access and infrastructure, or through conservation and restoration programs that support the healthy landscapes and waterways upon which recreationists depend. These include reauthorizations and investments in existing programs, changes to programs, and, in some cases, new programs. Our high-level recommendations include:

- Investing in recreation access, water quality, and carbon stewardship through Farm Bill conservation programs;
- Clarifying the process for closures of Forest Service recreation lands;
- Supporting science-based forest restoration practices, including prescribed fire, and achieving recreation co-benefits through wildfire resilience projects;
- Investing in local recreation economies through Rural Development programs; and
- Maintaining Inflation Reduction Act climate investments and retaining a robust environmental review and public input process for forestry projects.

Our recommendations are listed below under each relevant Farm Bill title.

---

<sup>1</sup> BUREAU OF ECON. ANALYSIS, BEA 22-55, OUTDOOR RECREATION SATELLITE ACCOUNT, U.S. AND STATES, 2021 (2022), available at <https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021>.

<sup>2</sup> H.R. REP. NO. 115-1072, at 677 (2018) (Conf. Rep.).

## Conservation Title:

- *Reauthorize and expand funding for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program.*<sup>3</sup> The VPA-HIP provides funding to states and tribal governments to encourage private landowners to allow public access to their lands for recreation and wildlife-related purposes. This program was funded at \$50M over five years in the 2018 Farm Bill and will expire in 2023 unless it is reauthorized. Outdoor Alliance supports increasing funding for the VPA-HIP to \$150M over five years to help USDA meet demand for the program and to support rural economic development. We also recommend that the Subcommittee explore how the VPA-HIP, or a separate program, could more clearly support access for recreational activities like climbing, boating, mountain biking, and skiing, that may not qualify as “wildlife dependent” recreation in line with the VPA-HIP.
- *Maintain and strengthen Inflation Reduction Act climate investments.* Ensure that conservation and climate-related investments from the Inflation Reduction Act are not reduced or diverted to other programs through the Farm Bill. Important programs include the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and other investments in the Natural Resources Conservation Service made through Sections 21001 and 21002 of the IRA.
- *Maintain and include robust funding for water quality programs.* The 2018 Farm Bill included funding or authorizations for multiple programs that maintain and improve water quality by addressing sedimentation and other pollution from agricultural lands, which provide benefits for water-based recreation. These programs, which include the Conservation Reserve Program<sup>4</sup> and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program,<sup>5</sup> should be carried forward and funded through the 2023 Farm Bill.

---

<sup>3</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 3839bb-5.

<sup>4</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 3831.

<sup>5</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 3871.

## Forestry Title:

- *Clarify the process for National Forest recreation closures.* The Forest Service is increasingly closing access to a significant amount of public land in response to wildfires without a clear process for considering public input or planning to reopen public lands for recreational use. Many of these closures are left in place for months or even years after fires are out and sometimes cover large areas entirely unaffected by fire or that otherwise pose no genuine public safety or resource protection issue. These closures negatively affect recreation-dependent economies and community quality of life. The Farm Bill can address this issue by establishing a clear, collaborative process by which the agency can reopen areas to recreational use while providing for public safety and wildfire protection.
- *Incorporate recreation into forest health projects.* Include direction to encourage the Forest Service to prioritize forest health and wildfire mitigation projects that have co-benefits for outdoor recreation, that include a recreation component, or that are designed to enhance or protect a recreation resource. Outdoor Alliance supports the Forest Service's goal of treating 50 million acres of forest lands in western states over the next decade, as outlined in the agency's 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy.<sup>6</sup> Many of the projects implemented through the strategy either overlap with, or are in the immediate vicinity of, high-value recreation lands. The Farm Bill can include policy directives, guidance, and report language to ensure that these projects simultaneously benefit outdoor recreation and wildfire resilience.
- *Increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire.* The outdoor recreation community is increasingly affected by severe wildfires and wildfire smoke. Prescribed fire is a critical fuels management and ecological restoration tool that is vastly underused. The Farm Bill should include incentives, key performance indicators, workforce development programs, and funding to facilitate responsible prescribed fire use, particularly in the western U.S.

---

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Dep't Of Agriculture, Forest Service, FS-1187a, Wildfire Crisis Strategy – Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America's Forests (2022), <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Confronting-Wildfire-Crisis.pdf>.

- *Retain environmental protections for federal forestry projects.* Exclude proposals to circumvent the public input process and other National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) protections for forestry projects on federal lands. The NEPA process is an important avenue by which the outdoor recreation community interfaces with the Forest Service during project planning to address site-specific concerns about impacts to recreation resources. While our community supports making the NEPA process more efficient and responsive to restoration needs on our public lands, these changes should not come at the expense of agencies' ability to consider public input and the best available science.
- *Recreation and wildfire infrastructure.* Encourage the Forest Service to systematically inventory and map river access points and other recreation sites in order to identify sites that can offer benefits for both fire management and recreation. As an example, river access sites can also serve as engine/tanker fill sites during fire operations.
- *Update Watershed Condition Framework authorization language.* The 2018 Farm Bill established a Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) to encourage the Forest Service to more strategically target its watershed restoration activities.<sup>7</sup> The language establishing this program could be improved to more clearly protect the highest functioning watersheds—often the areas most valued by the outdoor recreation community. We recommend authorizing appropriations up to \$20 million for this program.
- *Improve authorization language for Forest Service Legacy Roads & Trails.* The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act permanently authorized the Forest Service's Legacy Roads & Trails program,<sup>8</sup> which helps the Forest Service improve and decommission degraded roads to achieve water quality and habitat objectives. The authorization language could be improved by directing the Forest Service to identify a minimum road system and by reducing barriers for decommissioning roads or converting roads to trails.

---

<sup>7</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 6543.

<sup>8</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 538a.

- *Establish a Forest Conservation Easement Program.* Privately-owned forestlands are important for their biodiversity and climate benefits, as well as their role in supporting recreation access and scenic values. The Farm Bill should establish a program to increase the use of forest conservation easements, similar to the existing NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

**Rural Development Title:**

- *Include the Rural Outdoor Investment Act.* The ROI Act (S. 3583) is a bill from the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress intended to support and spur economic opportunities related to outdoor recreation in rural communities. The bill encourages collaboration between the Economic Development Administration, USDA Rural Development, and the Small Business Administration, and authorizes funds to support recreation infrastructure, planning, and business assistance.
- *Rural housing to support recreation.* Create a pilot program to address housing needs for the recreation workforce. High housing costs in areas near public lands can pose a barrier to hiring the workforce necessary to sustainably manage recreational use.
- *Expand the Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program to include recreation.* This USDA Rural Development grant program provides funding for community facilities in rural areas. The language currently deems facilities used primarily for recreational purposes as ineligible. Expanding eligibility for this program to include trails, local parks, and other outdoor recreation infrastructure would better enable rural communities to realize the economic benefits of outdoor recreation.

\* \* \*

Thank you for considering our community's requests. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the next Farm Bill includes strong conservation, forestry, and rural development policies that support outdoor recreation and rural outdoor economies.



Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis Geltman".

Louis Geltman  
Policy Director  
Outdoor Alliance

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shoren Brown".

Shoren Brown  
Vice President, Public Affairs  
The Conservation Alliance

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rich Harper".

Rich Harper  
Director of Government Affairs  
Outdoor Industry Association



## Our Organizations

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

The Conservation Alliance is an organization of like-minded businesses whose collective contributions support grassroots environmental organizations and their efforts to protect wild places where outdoor enthusiasts recreate. Alliance funds have played a key role in protecting rivers, trails, wildlands and climbing areas. Membership in the Alliance is open to all companies who care about protecting our most threatened wild places for habitat and outdoor recreation. Since its inception in 1989, The Conservation Alliance has contributed more than \$21 million, helped to protect more than 51 million acres of wildlands; protect 3,107 miles of rivers; stop or remove 34 dams; designate five marine reserves; and purchase 14 climbing areas. For complete information on The Conservation Alliance, see [www.conservationalliance.com](http://www.conservationalliance.com).

Based in Boulder, Colo., with offices in Washington, D.C., Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) is the leading trade association for the outdoor industry. For more than 30 years, OIA has served as the trusted convenor, resource, and voice of the outdoor industry. OIA unites and serves manufacturers, suppliers, sales representatives, and retailer members through its focus on trade and recreation policy, sustainable business innovation, and outdoor participation. The association provides its members with insights, advocacy, and opportunities for action that support the long-term success of outdoor businesses and ensure the outdoor experience for all. For more information, visit [outdoorindustry.org](http://outdoorindustry.org).