Colorado trails, rivers and ski slopes are a critical resource

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By DONNA LYNNE, Lieutenant Governor of Colorado.

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Colorado. Our great state’s name conjures images of snow-capped peaks, clear blue trout streams and verdant forests stretching as far as the eye can see. These incredible natural resources are beloved not only by Colorado residents, but by visitors from across the world.

People don’t love our state just for the postcard views; they love the state because they can actually put themselves in these incredible places — hiking to the top of Longs Peak or schussing Summit County’s legendary ski slopes.

Outdoor recreation is a driving force in Colorado’s economy. A recent study shows that Colorado’s outdoor recreation industry contributes almost $2 billion to our economy — and that is just walking, hiking and biking. Add to these numbers the billions generated from skiing, fishing, hunting and other outdoor activities, and it becomes clear that outdoor recreation is a Colorado powerhouse. It’s just one of the reasons that the Hickenlooper administration has done so much work on connecting people with the outdoors through initiatives like Colorado the Beautiful and the Outdoor Recreation Office.

Hiking trails, river put-ins and campgrounds don’t maintain themselves. Land management agencies responsible for stewarding these precious resources have had budgetary constraints, and that is jeopardizing our ability to realize the economic and natural benefits these lands provide.

Even some of the most iconic recreation resources in Colorado — our fourteeners (Colorado’s mountain peaks over 14,000 feet) — are suffering, despite impacting our state’s economy by more than $70 million a year, according to a 2015 report by the Colorado Fourteener Initiative.

Yet, a recent report card from the initiative determined that these same peaks are in need of nearly $25 million worth of trail improvements and restoration activities. I have summited every fourteener in the state, and have witnessed firsthand the need for trail improvements. These trails are eroded, fragile alpine habitat is being damaged, and recreational experiences are suffering. That’s what happens when more than 260,000 hikers scale these peaks every year and the existing trail networks can’t handle the ever-increasing traffic.

Many of Colorado’s hiking and biking trails are in poor condition, not just those on fourteeners. Despite the heroic efforts of land managers and community-based groups like CFI and thousands of dedicated volunteers, these economic engines need a serious tune-up.

In order to ensure that all of Colorado’s trails, and our majestic fourteeners, continue to inspire and provide for Coloradans and visitors alike, we need innovative ideas and broad support to get work done improving access, trails and ecosystems. Fortunately, there are organizations and initiatives that are bringing funding, volunteers, collaborative expertise and vision to making the recreation resources that
drive so much of Colorado’s economy sustainable. We know that we all benefit from these resources, and we need to work together in new ways to improve them.

The National Forest Foundation’s Find your Fourteener initiative is bringing together more than half a dozen groups to create proactive and forward-thinking solutions for our fourteeners. These groups have identified “pinch points” that are frustrating trail maintenance and ecosystem restoration and are finding creative ways to get more work done each short field season.

No doubt many of you are asking how you can help this effort. Fortunately, it’s easy. If you are an individual wanting to help, simply visit www.nationalforests.org/fourteener to donate or learn how to volunteer. If you have a business that benefits from Colorado’s outdoor economy, especially our fourteeners, please consider reaching out to the National Forest Foundation to see how your business can help.

Whatever you do, I hope you’ll join me in supporting the stewardship of Colorado’s recreation resources and the organizations that are working collaboratively to improve them.

I’ll see you on the trail!