

**Statement of  
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**House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Hearing on  
“EXPLORE America250 – Celebrating One Year of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act”**

**January 21, 2026**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department of the Interior’s (Department) progress implementing the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act. The EXPLORE Act represents a landmark commitment to expanding outdoor recreation on public lands and waters, supporting rural economies and communities while enhancing the American quality of life.

The Department and its bureaus manage approximately 480 million acres of federal lands, providing exceptional recreational opportunities and experiences that support 5 million jobs across the country, a \$1.2 trillion economic output, and 2.3 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product. Rising demand for this type of recreation reflects Americans’ deep connection to their public lands and underscores their need for greater access.

The EXPLORE Act aligns with the Department’s stewardship responsibilities to showcase the beauty and grandeur of our public lands while delivering greater access to world-class recreational experiences. Among its many improvements to outdoor recreation management, the EXPLORE Act enhances infrastructure, expands accessibility, and streamlines permitting with simplified applications and reduced costs. These improvements are consistent with the Department’s mission to ensure the conservation of our public lands and share the story of our cultural heritage for the benefit and enjoyment of all Americans.

**Secretary’s Order 3435**

Secretary Burgum issued Secretary’s Order (SO) 3435, *Implementation of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act*, on June 25, 2025, to establish the Department’s framework for fully implementing and maximizing the impact of the EXPLORE Act. Successful implementation of the law requires coordinated action across all of the Department’s bureaus and offices. We are committed to ensuring timely implementation to expand outdoor recreation opportunities for Americans and maintaining the highest standards of stewardship.

**Implementation of the EXPLORE Act**

***Stakeholder Engagement***

The Department recognizes that stakeholder engagement and interagency coordination are at the heart of the EXPLORE Act and has taken meaningful steps to strengthen both. We are deepening our engagement with stakeholders including gateway communities, tribes, and state and local governments to ensure our actions reflect the needs and values of the American people. In accordance with Section 131 of the EXPLORE Act, which focuses on the needs of gateway communities adjacent to federal lands, and Secretary's Order 3434, *Strengthening Coordination with Gateway Communities*, the Department has enhanced collaboration with gateway communities by establishing clear points of contact, improving communication, and fostering mutually beneficial partnerships.

For example, the National Park Service (NPS) has designated a gateway community coordinator at every unit of the national park system and is making sure that regular engagement with gateway communities occurs. Other Department bureaus, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), are also developing systems to engage with gateway communities and tailor outreach and support efforts to meet local needs. In addition, the BLM is developing guidance to support recreation-related Good Neighbor Authority agreements, in accordance with Section 351, and the NPS is using expanded Good Neighbor authority to enhance recreation opportunities and stewardship on federal lands. These partnerships not only improve recreation management, but can also provide valuable support for state, tribal, and local economies by creating new opportunities for collaboration, investment, and shared stewardship.

The Department is also strengthening coordination with the private sector to support data collection, transparency and technological upgrades. This collaboration keeps the Department's approach efficient, innovative, and responsive to trends in outdoor recreation. In support of this engagement, Secretary Burgum personally participated in the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable's Technology and Innovation Summit in September 2025, engaging directly with industry leaders to explore new opportunities for collaboration, data sharing, and the adoption of emerging technologies that will enhance the visitor experience and support the long-term sustainability of our public lands.

Finally, the Department is strengthening interagency coordination by leveraging the EXPLORE Act's codification of the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR), ensuring robust and sustained coordination across federal agencies on recreation program delivery, emergency response planning, investment, research, public information, and partnerships. This collaborative approach ensures that the Administration's efforts are unified, efficient, and responsive to the needs of the American public.

## ***Title I***

In accordance with Title I of the EXPLORE Act, the Department is advancing recreation priorities including conducting comprehensive recreation resource inventories, updating climbing guidance, and streamlining filming permits, so that our federal lands can meet the needs of today's visitors.

For example, Section 122 requires the development of guidance related to fixed anchors for recreational climbing in wilderness areas. The Department is actively leading a coordinated effort across its bureaus to review existing regulations and policies and develop consistent,

comprehensive guidance, with the goal of ensuring that future climbing management reflects both statutory requirements and the needs of the climbing community and public land users.

In addition, the Department has taken steps to implement Section 123, which provides for expanded access to target shooting ranges on BLM-managed lands. The BLM has completed a nationwide inventory of existing shooting ranges and is actively coordinating with state partners to identify needs and opportunities for new or improved facilities. This work will ensure that recreational target shooting is supported across BLM-managed lands, and that future construction is guided by stakeholder input. The BLM is also leading a federal interagency effort to update the Federal Lands Hunting, Fishing, and Shooting Sports Roundtable Memorandum of Understanding. The national roundtable comprised of BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), U.S. Forest Service and 13 private organizations representing the sportsmen's community will play a key role in implementing this section of the EXPLORE Act.

And the NPS has expanded the Battlefield Land Acquisition Grant program, as provided in Section 157, to include additional eligible applicants and has issued a Notice of Funding Opportunity to reflect those changes. Additionally, NPS has initiated updates to its Battlefield Report to document recent preservation activities, changes in battlefield conditions, and other significant developments affecting these resources.

## ***Title II***

Title II of the EXPLORE Act addresses improvements to public access, including enhancing accessibility for people with disabilities, as well as fostering engagement with military servicemembers, veterans, and youth visitors.

Specifically, Sections 214 and 215 direct the Department to identify locations for new accessible trails and other accessible recreation opportunities on lands managed by the BLM, the FWS, and the NPS. The Department is reviewing areas with potential for accessibility-focused projects and has received valuable input from the affected communities. In addition, the Department continues to coordinate closely with stakeholders to ensure projects reflect their needs and priorities.

Section 224 directs the FICOR to develop a strategy to increase recreational visits to federal lands and waters by members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and Gold Star Families. Efforts to fulfill this important direction include working closely with the Department's federal partners with the U.S. Forest Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of War to collaboratively draft an interagency implementation strategy. This strategy is expected to be available for public review in the coming months.

## ***Title III***

The Department is modernizing our recreation and permitting systems, making it easier for visitors to obtain entrance passes and streamlining processes for obtaining permits, as provided in Title III.

The Department has made the full suite of America the Beautiful passes (including Annual, Military, Senior, 4th Grade, and Access passes) available in a fully digital format through Recreation.gov, in compliance with the requirements of Section 322. In addition, visitors can now use their mobile devices to purchase, store, and use their passes instantly. Digital passes may also be linked to physical cards for added convenience and flexibility.

Additionally, Sections 311 through 320 address various aspects of special recreation permits (SRPs), from revising SRP guidance to increasing permit flexibility and improving permit administration. In accordance with these provisions, the BLM is actively engaged in efforts that will make it easier for outfitters and the public to recreate on federal lands and waters while ensuring compliance and environmental stewardship from users. This includes updates to the BLM's online permitting system and aligning applicable guidance to meet EXPLORE Act requirements. The BLM also intends to pursue rulemaking to align SRP regulations with the EXPLORE Act. Finally, the BLM has adopted new categorical exclusions to further streamline and expedite permit processing, when appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

The Department is committed to fulfilling the vision of the EXPLORE Act by strengthening relationships, expanding access, modernizing recreation management, and ensuring that all Americans can enjoy the benefits of our nation's public lands and waters. At the same time, the Department has made significant progress addressing the condition of our existing assets with funding provided the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund – originally established by President Trump in his first term. Reauthorization of this Fund to reduce our maintenance backlog, in addition to continued implementation of the EXPLORE Act, would represent a critical commitment to the President's vision for conservation and recreation access in America. We appreciate the Subcommittee's leadership and oversight, and we look forward to continued collaboration on these issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.