

EXPLORE Act

EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at our National Parks and Public Lands

Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Hearing on

EXPLORE America250: Enhancing Accessibility at our National Parks and Public Lands

April 22, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement for the record on the Department of the Interior's (Department) progress implementing accessibility provisions of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act. The EXPLORE Act represents a landmark bipartisan commitment to strengthening and modernizing the nation's outdoor recreation opportunities on public lands, and modernization includes accessibility.

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.

For millions of individuals, barriers to accessing public lands can limit participation in the physical, mental, and educational benefits that outdoor recreation provides. The Department is committed to ensuring Federal lands remain accessible, welcoming, and responsibly managed. The EXPLORE Act aligns with the Department's efforts by prioritizing accessibility enhancements for people with disabilities, programs for military servicemembers and veterans, and initiatives for youth access. We also recognize and value the vital contributions of our partners, communities, and stakeholders, whose collaboration is essential to successful implementation.

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

Access for People with Disabilities

Title II, Subtitle A of the EXPLORE Act includes provisions aimed at improving access to Federal lands and waters for people with disabilities. These provisions direct the Department to conduct comprehensive accessibility assessments of outdoor recreation opportunities and trails, and to share the results of those assessments publicly. This information will empower people with disabilities to make informed decisions about where and how they can take advantage of recreation opportunities. Subtitle A also calls for expanding accessible trails and recreational opportunities, as well as implementing a Trail Partnership Pilot Program to evaluate, enhance, and expand trail experiences for individuals who use assistive technologies.

Bureaus across the Department are making strong progress toward fulfilling these requirements. For example, the National Park Service (NPS) collaborated with disability organizations to identify national parks across the country where adding accessible recreation opportunities and trails will have the greatest impact for visitors with disabilities. Site visits by accessibility subject matter experts are being planned to assess what accessible outdoor recreation and trail experiences already exist in national parks, and what opportunities can be made to increase accessibility in the near future. The NPS further plans to launch a feature on its app that makes it easier to find accessibility information about trails, and has recently worked with twenty-five parks to improve accessibility information on their websites, with another eleven national park website enhancement projects in process.

In addition, the NPS, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Reclamation continue to collaborate on Subtitle A to advance accessible recreation access with the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers through the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation's Accessibility Subgroup. This coordination enables agencies to share best practices, identify common challenges, develop consistent approaches, and leverage collective expertise to maximize the impact of the EXPLORE Act's accessibility provisions.

Military & Veterans in Parks

Title II, Subtitle B of the EXPLORE Act strengthens outdoor recreation opportunities for military servicemembers, veterans, and their families. These provisions direct the

development of educational and public awareness materials, as well as a national strategy to increase visits to Federal lands and waters by servicemembers, veterans, and Gold Star Families. Subtitle B also calls for establishment of dedicated military veterans outdoor recreation liaisons, expansion of partnerships to promote military and veteran recreation, and improvements to career and volunteer opportunities for veterans.

The Department is committed to improving recreation experiences for military servicemembers, veterans, and their families. For example, the NPS partners with multiple non-profit organizations, including the National Park Trust and Blue Star Families, to offer a suite of military-serving recreation engagement opportunities for families, disabled veterans, and Gold Star Families. The NPS also partners with the Defense Health Agency to administer the Military Families Outdoors program, which connects active duty servicemembers and their families to the health benefits of outdoor recreation and their federal lands. Through these partnerships, the NPS offers facilitated outdoor experiences as well as digital and printed resources on recreation in parks, and an online communications campaign to help servicemembers access free military passes. In 2025, these programs collectively served more than 14,000 military-connected individuals.

These efforts require the Department to coordinate closely with other Federal agencies, such as the Departments of Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, and War. Activities carried out under the EXPLORE Act, together with ongoing efforts under the Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act of 2020, have strengthened interagency coordination on military and veteran recreation initiatives. For example, under Section 224, the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation is developing an interagency strategy to increase visits to Federal recreation sites by members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and Gold Star Family members. In addition, the Department has collaborated closely with the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Veterans Affairs, and Department of War to develop a unified, governmentwide approach to improving outdoor recreation opportunities for servicemembers, veterans and their families. This strategy is expected to be available for public review in the coming months.

Youth Access

Title II, Subtitle C of the EXPLORE Act advances opportunities for young people to experience and enjoy Federal lands and waters. These provisions direct the development of a strategy to increase youth recreation visits, as well as reauthorize the Every Kid Outdoors program through 2031.

The Department has a longstanding commitment to fostering the next generation of public land stewards. This includes introducing young people to the outdoors at a formative age through the Every Kid Outdoors program, which helps cultivate early connections to nature that can inspire lifelong engagement. In the 2023–2024 academic year, more than 275,000 participants joined in-person Every Kid Outdoors programs that connected students and their families with their public lands and waters. Section 232 of the EXPLORE Act extended the Every Kid Outdoors Act through 2031, allowing the Department and its partner agencies to continue providing fourth grade students and their families with free access to Federal recreational lands and waters.

Conclusion

The Department is committed to implementing the accessibility provisions of the EXPLORE Act with diligence and collaboration. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s continued leadership and oversight, and look forward to continued collaboration on expanding access to high-quality recreation opportunities across our nation’s public lands and waters.