

December 22, 2023

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
United States House of Representatives
202 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jared Huffman
United States House of Representatives
2445 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representatives Westerman and Huffman,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations representing segments of the U.S. outdoor recreation industry—we thank you for your leadership in introducing the Lake Access Keeping Economies Strong (LAKES) Act. This bipartisan, bicameral legislation will equip the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), a leading provider of public access recreation opportunities, with the tools and resources that are needed to support historic demand for recreation while growing the economic footprint of the outdoor industry in communities across the country. By extending recreation fee retention authority to the Corps and making reforms to the Corps' existing joint management authority, the LAKES Act will reinvest recreation fees back into the maintenance and repair of recreation facilities and infrastructure, and ensure the Corps has the proper authorities needed to facilitate public-private partnerships crucial to the management of these public recreation access sites, delivering historic wins for public recreation nation-wide.

Outdoor recreation has long been underrecognized as an economic engine in the United States, yet the outdoor recreation sector accounts for 2.2 percent of U.S. GDP, generating \$1.1 trillion dollars in gross economic output and supporting over 5 million jobs across the country. The LAKES Act comes at a most crucial time, as the outdoor recreation economy has been waning since the massive economic expansion experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the outdoor recreation industry grew three times faster than the U.S. economy as a whole. Conventional outdoor recreation activities—such as bicycling, boating, hunting, hiking, etc.—lead this rise in the popularity, accounting for 37.4 percent of U.S. outdoor recreation added, up from 30.6 percent in 2019. In 2021, the recreational boating community welcomed over 415,000 first-time boat owners, and 67 million Americans plan to take a RV trip this year, with a record 11.2 million households now owning an RV—up 26 percent over the past 10 years, and 62 percent over the past 20 years. During this time, these industry segments experienced record sales and unprecedented growth, as Americans across the country saw the value of being outside and enjoying what nature provides.

This rise has showcased the popularity of such activities and the significant role of the outdoor industry as an economic driver. It has also illuminated one of the most pressing issues facing the industry; the need for adequate climate resilient, and up-to-date recreation infrastructure and

facilities that meet high demand. Despite the extensive role Corps managed recreation sites play in supporting the recreation economic boom the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated, the Corps recreation program is historically underfunded and is often completely excluded from, or benefits considerably less than, other agencies through significantly impactful federal lands and waters policy and funding mechanism such as the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA).

For instance, while the Corps manages recreation visitation and transportation infrastructure asset catalogues on scale with the National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the U.S. Forest Service (FS), these three agencies 1) are able to retain a portion of recreation fee revenue to reinvest in recreation infrastructure through FLREA authority, 2) are recipients of GAOA funding, with NPS receiving 70 percent of total GAOA deferred maintenance funding, and 3) receive direct set asides from the Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP) that takes up a majority of the programs funding leaving the Corps, USBR, and BLM (another GAOA recipient) to compete for any remaining funding to go toward maintaining infrastructure that provides access to high-visitation.

Continuing to underfund the Corps' recreation program is an unsustainable track that will have severe impacts on the program's ability to meet increasing visitation demand, fund basic staffing and labor, and keep parks operating at basic service levels. At a time when Corps recreation sites are experiencing more wear and tear than ever, now is the time to ensure fees Americans pay into recreational experiences are invested in continuing to ensure those experiences for generations to come. Enactment of the LAKES Act will take an essential first step in setting the Corps on track toward being funded and resourced as the major provider of federal recreation access that it already is.

We applaud your bipartisan leadership and prioritization of recreation access and the outdoor economy and stand ready to work with you to ensure passage of this key legislation that will better position the Corps' recreation program to improve public recreation access and protect the significant economic contributions Corps-managed recreation sites drive in local economies across the country.

Sincerely,

American Catfishing Association
American Sportfishing Association
Association of Marina Industries
Back Country Horsemen of America
Bass Anglers Sportsman Society
Boat Owners Association of the United States
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
Corps Foundation
International Game Fish Association
Major League Fishing
Marine Retailers Association of the Americas

National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds
National Marine Manufacturers Association
National Professional Anglers Association
National RV Dealers Association
Outdoor Industry Association
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable
People for Bikes
Public Lands Alliance
REI
RV Industry Association
Southeast Tourism Society
The Bass Federation, Inc.
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
The Walleye Federation
Vista Outdoors