

April 27, 2023

The Honorable Kevin Cramer
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
313 Hart Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
303 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Cramer and Heinrich,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations representing segments across the U.S. outdoor recreation industry – we thank you for your leadership in introducing the Lake Access Keeping Economies Strong (LAKES Act)– bipartisan legislation to better equip the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), a leading provider of public recreation opportunities, to support historic demand for recreation while growing the economic footprint of the outdoor industry in communities across the country. Through extending recreation fee retention authority to the Corps and making needed 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 provide the Corps with an essential tool to facilitate public private partnerships in the management of recreation sites – delivering historic wins for public recreation access nation-wide.

Outdoor recreation has long been an underrecognized economic driver in the United States, yet the outdoor sector accounts for 1.9 percent of U.S. GDP, generating \$862 billion in gross economic output and supporting over 4.5 million jobs across the country. In 2021, the outdoor recreation economy grew [three times faster](#) than the U.S. economy as a whole. Traditional outdoor recreation – such as boating, fishing, hiking, and RVing – thrived, with these activities increasing their contribution to the overall outdoor recreation economy by 22 percent.

Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 100 million Americans went boating every year, but as more and more Americans have looked to the outdoors for an escape, the recreational boating industry has experienced record growth. For the second consecutive year, in 2021 the recreational boating community welcomed over 415,000 first-time boat buyers to the market. Additionally, 67 million Americans plan to take an RV trip this year, with a record 11.2 million households now owning an RV – up 26% over the past 10 years and a 62% over the past 20 years. The Corps’ role in supporting the increased demand for public boating access opportunities is evident by the fact that there were 256 million visits to Corps lake and river projects in 2020 compared to the 237 million visitors the National Park Service (NPS) hosted.

While this rise has showcased the popularity of such activities as a safe and fun way to spend time with loved ones, it has also illuminated one of the most pressing issues facing the industry. There remains a dire 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 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
Outdoor Industry Association
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable
People for Bikes
Public Lands Alliance
REI
RV Industry Association
Southeast Tourism Society
The Bass Federation, Inc.
The Walleye Federation
Vista Outdoors