



November 17, 2021

U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Policy Analysis—Mailstop 3530
ATTN: E.O. 13985 Recreation Comments
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Department of Interior,

Please see below for comments from the City of Aspen, a local government serving a rural community high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

Related to what barriers our rural communities face visiting public lands and waters managed by DOI; suggestions on how DOI remove or reduce barriers communities and individuals face when we recreate or attempt to recreate on DOI-managed lands and water; and how DOI can establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities.

ISSUES

The United States is facing a conservation and climate crisis as nature declines and [greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase](#).¹ [Science tells us that worldwide biodiversity is deteriorating at a faster rate than at any time in human history](#).² From [2001 to 2017, more than 24 million acres of land were lost to human development](#)³ in the lower 48 United States, which equals the loss of one football field-sized patch of land every 30 seconds. We can not afford to lose more lands while people are flocking to public lands in record numbers - especially in Western rural communities.

We need to protect, restore, and conserve more public lands, water, wildlife, and nature; help with the influx of new residents and visitors and overcrowding; and grow the number of people who can experience our public lands and the outdoors.

[Studies](#)⁴ have shown the benefits of proximity to public lands, finding that counties in the West with more federal lands perform better in four key economic factors. The rural, non-metro counties

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/26/782586224/greenhouse-gas-emissions-are-still-rising-u-n-report-says>

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/partner-content-nature-needs-us-to-act-now>

³ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/08/06/473242/much-nature-america-keep/>

⁴ <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/federal-lands-performance/>

with the highest percentage of federal public lands have experienced faster growth in population, employment, personal income, and per capita income -- highlighting the importance of federal public lands in the West.

Yet, as more people move to mountain communities, the nature gap continues, and the West burns due to increased fossil fuel emissions. Western mountain communities are directly affected as they grapple with increased infrastructure costs and needs and dire, long-term, and costly [health](#)⁵ and [climate impacts](#)⁶ like the release of harmful methane gas; heat, drought, floods, and wildfire; and dust on snow.

Prudent and pragmatic steps must be taken to increase land restoration and protection while reversing and mitigating climate change's devastating impacts by reducing the amount of greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution that contribute to climate change.

WHY ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN

PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS

Scientists say that the loss of biodiversity, the increasing number of extreme weather events, and human encroachment upon wildlife habitat may [increase the risk of the transmission of infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and SARS](#).⁷

Our natural places help provide food security, clean air to breathe, and clean water to drink while offering us a wide range of health benefits; and every person, regardless of race, background, or economic status, should have access to close-to-home opportunities to get outside in nature.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

[Wilderness, wildlife refuges, national conservation lands, monuments, and other protected areas drive our local economies](#)⁸ and provide access for hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, camping, and other outdoor recreation pursuits.

⁵

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c9307f79392b49031d551/t/5f86a9a58ae6d9031b3df3e8/1602660778366/Running+Out+of+Time+Briefing+Paper.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2020/oct/20/trump-us-dirtier-planet-warmer-75-ways?>

⁷ <https://www.who.int/globalchange/climate/en/chapter6.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.wyofile.com/wilderness-economics/>

Economic research shows that [employment and personal income grew significantly faster in rural counties with conserved, restored, and protected public lands](#)⁹ than rural counties with fewer protected and conserved areas. Conserved public lands are the backbone of the rapidly growing outdoor recreation economy, generating [\\$788 billion in consumer spending nationally and supporting 5.2 million jobs](#).¹⁰ One hundred [economists and scientists have found that the global economy would benefit from the creation of far more protected areas on land and at sea than we have today](#).¹¹

Conserved private lands, including working forests, farms, and ranches, protect open spaces, preserve threatened wildlife, and help maintain the way of life in many Western mountain communities.

Science has shown that conserving nature can provide over [one-third of the cost-effective climate mitigation needed through 2030](#)¹² to hold warming below 2°C.

IDEAS ON ACTIONS ADMINISTRATION CAN TAKE

Below are some concrete next steps federal officials and Congress can take to help advance racial equity and support for undeserved communities.

Expand an Outdoors for All

[Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately impacted by the dual climate and nature crises and continue to experience inequitable access to nature and its many benefits](#)¹³ including clean air and water. In fact, 74 percent of communities of color and 70 percent of low-income communities in the contiguous United States live in [nature-deprived areas](#)¹⁴ and [pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels caused 8.7 million or one in five deaths globally](#).¹⁵

[Fossil fuel drilling on our public lands results in nearly 25% of all climate emitting pollution in the U.S.](#)¹⁶, and these impacts are disproportionately hurting Black, Brown, Indigenous, and working class people. These stressors put our communities in harm's way with increased public health impacts, more drought, drastic temperature changes, and wildfires. Climate impacts also affect our community economies by damaging agricultural jobs, and threatening tourism and outdoor recreation economies.

⁹ <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/federal-lands-performance/>

¹⁰ <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>

¹¹ <https://www.campaignfornature.org/protecting-30-of-the-planet-for-nature-economic-analysis>

¹² <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/44/11645>

¹³ https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Env_Justice_Report_20160727.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/07/21/487787/the-nature-gap/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/09/fossil-fuels-pollution-deaths-research>

¹⁶ <https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/sir20185131>

Improving access to outdoor spaces close-to-home, and restoring degraded lands and waters will provide physical, spiritual, and mental health benefits.

Increase Funding

Many local communities are feeling the brunt of increased recreation and demands on our federal lands over the past year. Many counties and municipalities have also had to supplement USDA Forest Service district budgets from their general funds to pay for additional ranger patrols because of inadequate federal funding to manage overrun areas.

Through greater investments from the [Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership](#),¹⁷ [Great American Outdoors Act](#),¹⁸ and [Land Water Conservation Fund](#),¹⁹ the addition of a [Gateway Community Dividend Program to the PILT program](#),²⁰ and an increase in funding for fighting wildfires, the public will be able to recreate closer to home, which will help to close the [Nature Gap](#).²¹

Streamline Processes

With more expedient approval of time-sensitive applications, like shovel-ready locally-funded community parks, through processes like the [Recreation and Public Purposes Act Patents and Leases](#),²² more people can get back to work while ensuring access to our amazing public lands.

One local elected official recommended that there might be a way to create a streamlined process with advocates who can be trained to help review and push applications through the pipeline.

Increase Federal Agency Staffing

Additional field staffing for federal agencies would also help local communities. For example, because the USDA Forest Service doesn't have the staffing or financial resources to properly manage campgrounds and recreation areas, many communities struggle to find the resources to deal with the increased needs. For example, one Western mountain community had to add more frequent and costly garbage collection services in response to an influx of visitors. Similarly, if a USDA Forest Service district office staff person is on vacation, no one else can process applications in a timely manner. It would be helpful to have additional staff who can help expedite urgent requests, as well as an increased staff presence at USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management district offices.

With tourism and development both at all-time highs, like in so many western communities,

¹⁷ <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDOJ/bulletins/2d870e0>

¹⁸ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3422>

¹⁹ <https://www.doi.gov/lwcf>

²⁰

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/546d52b2e4b079301f4abb7f/t/5f8f24cf272dc13fcc9621db/1603216592898/PILT+Mountain+Pact+Letter+Fall+2020.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/07/21/487787/the-nature-gap/>

²² <https://www.blm.gov/policy/im-2011-162>

community staff and leaders are feeling significant pressure.

Increase Consultation with Local Elected Officials

The recent and significant increase in visitation to our public lands and other recreation areas reveals how important these areas are to the health and well being of the American people, and how fragile many of these landscapes are. Federal government recognition of this influx of recreators, of the cost of hosting them, and a sincere offer to work with local governments on solutions would go a long way towards helping expand efforts around the America the Beautiful initiative.

One way to do this might be by offering to match funds through grants to incentivize local leaders to raise funds or other resources so that they have a sense of ownership.

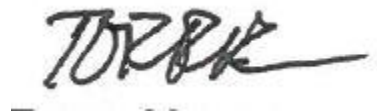
Incentivize Companies to Capture Methane

The [fugitive emissions from abandoned coal mines and oil and gas flaring cause much of the carbon emissions in our county](#).²³ The Federal government should be incentivizing oil and gas companies across the nation to capture the escaping methane everywhere to redeploy jobs from the fossil fuel sector directly into greenhouse gas management.

Support a 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps

The country needs an inclusive 21st-century Civilian [Climate Corps](#),²⁴ which would hire thousands of young people to mitigate the impacts of climate change, provide much-needed support in managing our public lands, and help to make the country more wildfire resilient.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'TORRE', with a horizontal line underneath.

Torre, Mayor
and Aspen City Council

²³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature19797>

²⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2021/05/06/biden-harris-administration-outlines-america-the-beautiful-initiative/>