

Testimony of Colin Robertson, Administrator  
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Good afternoon, Senators Rosen, Scott, and Subcommittee members.

For the record, my name is Colin Robertson, and I am the Administrator of the new Division of Outdoor Recreation in the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Witnesses here today—including me—have been asked to provide insights into the contribution of outdoor recreation to the economy, and solutions for promoting the outdoor industry, investing in local communities, supporting U.S. jobs and businesses, and, equally importantly, protecting and enhancing the public lands and waters that support outdoor recreation activities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on this important topic.

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account's most recent data analysis, in 2019—pre-COVID—the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 2.1 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), or \$460 billion. In 2019, the outdoor recreation economy accounted for 3.1 percent of Nevada's overall GDP—one full percentage point more than the national average, and representing significant growth over the year prior in the state. It also accounted for 60,000 jobs in 2019.

Interest and participation in outdoor recreation activities and experiences continues to grow nationwide—as do the economic, community, and public land and water impacts associated with outdoor recreation, both good and not so good. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded some of these effects.

From an outdoor industry perspective, for some sectors pandemic-induced increases in outdoor recreation led to historically high sales, but supply chain issues and continued high demand have created shortages and price increases for many recreation-related products. If you have tried to purchase a bicycle recently, you know what I mean. At the same time, COVID closures and travel restrictions led to significant negative impacts on guides and outfitters, campground and marina owners/operators, outdoor recreation concessions, non-profit education organizations, and state and local governments, among others. These impacts hit Nevada particularly hard. Travel and tourism in Nevada dropped precipitously during COVID, with visitor volume and spending both down by more than 50 percent in 2020. Employment in the travel/tourism industry dropped by more than 24 percent.

At the same time, outdoor recreation participation increased dramatically in 2020. Data from the newest edition of the USDA Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey indicate

remarkable increases in national forest visitation in 2020, including a 40 percent increase in dispersed camping on general forest lands, and a more than 70 percent increase in visits to wilderness areas. Opportunities to find local, safe, and socially distanced recreation outdoors no doubt motivated this increase, especially when most developed recreation sites on federally managed public lands were closed last year. Unfortunately, increased visitation also contributed to increased wildfires on public lands and to significant resource impacts created by "nature novices" who are not familiar with the tenets of responsible recreation, outdoor ethics, or Leave No Trace sustainable recreation principles. Thus, as we collectively work to create more outdoor recreation opportunities, we must also prioritize outdoor recreation education, to protect both the recreationist and our shared natural resources.

The Outdoor Industry Association's recent special report, "New Outdoor Participant (COVID and Beyond)," reveals that new outdoor recreation participants from last year are more likely to be female, younger, living in an urban area, and slightly more ethnically diverse than existing participants. New participants primarily sought socially-distanced outdoor activities to safely spend time with loved ones, exercise, stay healthy, or reduce screen-time fatigue. New participants are largely motivated by outdoor recreation opportunities with low barriers to entry that are available and accessible within 10 miles of their homes, including walking, running, biking and hiking.

We need State Offices of Outdoor Recreation, the Confluence of States (the national alliance of these offices), and the National Governor's Association Outdoor Recreation Learning Network to continue working to encourage, foster, and support the numerous positive health, education, conservation, and economic benefits associated with outdoor recreation. At the same time, we need more federal recognition of the importance of outdoor recreation by investing in local communities; funding the conservation, protection, and sustainable recreational use of public lands and waters; and supporting U.S. jobs and businesses in the outdoor industry. Nowhere is this truer than in Nevada, where over 85 percent of our land is federally managed, including over 60 percent by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service. Some specific opportunities include:

**Support Sustainable and Responsible Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Initiatives.** As public lands reopen, we risk diving headfirst back into an overcrowding crisis, replete with increased natural resource impacts on the lands that belong to the American people. The Lake Tahoe Basin, for example, is one-third the size of Yosemite National Park, yet is visited by three times as many people (15+ million), creating extraordinary pressures on Tahoe's public lands and famously clear waters. Going forward, we must determine what role the Corporation for Travel Promotion, the National Travel and Tourism Office, and the Travel and Tourism Advisory Board can play to ensure the tourism industry adopts strategies and practices to support marketing, communications, and management oriented toward responsible and sustainable outdoor recreation and tourism that avoid exploitation and over-crowding. Can these agencies help establish community-based eco-tourism across the U.S.?

**Support Further Strategic Investment In Our Nation's Public Land Management Agencies.** In particular, we need more targeted recreation-related funding for personnel and programs within public land management agencies, including funding for planning, maintenance, and operations of existing and future infrastructure needed to accommodate the growth in outdoor recreation. Also, housing near or on public lands for land management agency staff, who are increasingly unable to afford to live where they work. Can Congress help the Federal land management agencies make sustainable outdoor recreation a national priority?

**Develop National Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Data Strategies.** Can the Subcommittee's oversight of Federal travel and tourism agencies help promote more coordination with the Confluence of States and the outdoor recreation industry to develop and improve data collection and analysis of outdoor recreation-related tourism and travel?

**Foster Equity and Inclusion and Promote Health Benefits.** Create and encourage more outdoor recreation opportunities close to home, particularly in underrepresented or disadvantaged communities. Parks, trails, and open spaces near where people live are a crucial part of growing participation and thereby supporting the outdoor industry. The pandemic has shown that there is a demand for close-to-home outdoor recreation. Support investment in programming that engages families in the outdoors. Help new participants make their activities more social as restrictions lift. Develop programs and services with the specific goal of diversifying the participant base, and strategies for encouraging people to start with activities that have relatively low barriers to entry, such as walking, running, hiking and birdwatching. Position outdoor recreation as an antidote to the mental health challenges faced by so many of our fellow citizens across the U.S.

**Reexamine Federal Outdoor Recreation Funding Match Requirements.** Federal funding match requirements, such as those required by the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund must take rural economic realities into account. For example, rural gateway communities often have the most outdoor recreation and outdoor tourism potential and abundant natural capital, but the least amount of revenue needed to meet 1:1 match requirements.

**Foster Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Workforce Development.** Work to understand the diverse needs of the outdoor industry. Materials science, advanced manufacturing, hospitality, and natural resource planning and conservation all stand to benefit from workforce development programs of many kinds, including the 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps. Developing these programs will ensure that local businesses and nonprofits benefit from outdoor recreation and tourism growth, thereby creating jobs directly and indirectly tied to outdoor recreation. How can the National Travel and Tourism Office and Advisory Board help support the formation of national outdoor industry workforce standards and invest in State and academic programs to advance them?

**Prioritize Affordable, Safe Housing.** An increase in tourism and remote work, particularly in rural gateway communities rich in outdoor assets, has exacerbated an affordable housing crisis that now threatens to erode the heart of many Western communities. People in those

communities are being priced out of quality housing, which poses a serious threat to private and public sector job recruitment and retention. How can Congress lead efforts to alleviate this disaster and support working class people—educators, advocates, retailers, outfitters and more—who make up the heart and soul of these communities?

With that overview, Senators Rosen and Scott, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I am happy to respond to any questions you or the rest of the Subcommittee members may have.