



Modernizing America's Outdoor Recreation Areas & Infrastructure

Overview

From their first day in office, President Joe Biden and the 117th Congress face perhaps the most daunting challenge of our generation: rebuilding our country from the health and economic crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. As lawmakers look to bolster the economy, the recreational boating community stands ready to support efforts to strengthen our nation's infrastructure and work alongside the administration to keep up with the challenges of growing demand and climate change.

Led by the recreational boating industry, the outdoor recreation economy is a major contributor to the U.S. economy, accounting for 2.1% of GDP, \$788 billion in economic output, and 5.2 million American jobs. The role of recreational boating in our economy has only grown more significant as Americans flocked to new outdoor activities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, with the industry selling more boats in 2020 than in the past 13 years combined. Over 44,000 new boat buyers entered the market between March and June, representing 10% year-over-year growth.

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: the need for adequate, sound, and up-to-date infrastructure that meets demand. Our aging outdoor infrastructure is vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and much of our nation's recreation areas are already in need of maintenance.

Without robust investment in our country's outdoor recreation infrastructure, these economic contributions—along with pastimes enjoyed by the vast majority of Americans—will be in jeopardy.

There are three critical challenges facing the outdoor recreation industry:

- Lack of sufficient outdoor access to meet demand
- Aging existing infrastructure
- Environmental impacts exacerbating issues affecting existing infrastructure

The following paper outlines how targeted investment and modernization, including a robust \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, can equip America's outdoor recreation areas and infrastructure for the challenges and opportunities they face now and in the years to come, with an emphasis on the following areas:

- Prioritized Access Projects and Streamlined Regulations
- Resiliency and Restoration Programs
- Increased Funding to Support Outdoor Recreation Public Access

ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS TO TAKE:

- » Implement the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA)
- » Amend U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Cooperative Management Authority
- » Streamline Permitting Process to Remove Barriers to Recreation
- » Public Boating Access Survey
- » Bring Federal Recreation Data Management into the 21st Century
- » Reassess Personal Watercraft (PWC) Bans in National Park System (NPS)

Prioritized Access Projects and Streamlined Regulations

There's a growing need to modernize our Eisenhower-era recreation infrastructure to help keep users safe and secure, as well as to expand access points like parking around nearby boat ramps. To prepare our outdoor recreation infrastructure for the future, we must increase access opportunities and address growing maintenance needs that have been exacerbated by an increase in visits and traffic over the past few decades.

Implement the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA)

- Prioritize Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) projects that create access in areas far from recreation opportunities and economic development for rural communities.
- Deploy a strategy for deploying the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund that entails transparent and collaborative planning, competitive, performance-based contracting, and centralized project management oversight.

Why? Now that GAOA is signed into law, industry and federal partners must work strategically to unleash its full potential by investing in deferred maintenance projects, modernizing recreation sites, and utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) for rural economic development and increased equitable access to parks. If implemented effectively, LWCF can be a significant tool to expand access infrastructure such as boat ramps and parking facilities.

Amend U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Cooperative Management Authority

- Amend the challenge cost sharing cooperative management agreements (CCSCMAs) authority granted under the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2016 to allow USACE to handle partner collected fees and return to the partner after processing the contract fees. Additionally, expand the authority to the private sector to facilitate opportunities for businesses and nonprofit organizations to supplement investments in USACE recreation infrastructure.

Why? While CCSMAs can help better maintain and improve facilities, a number of limitations have prevented USACE from fully implementing the CCSCMA authority to date. Under the existing authority, USACE is unable to use the recreation system (Recreation.gov) to collect and handle any non-USACE revenue and send the funds back to the partner, deterring partners who have shown interest in cooperatively managing parks with USACE. Additionally, the current authority only allows for cooperative management with non-federal public entities, but most of the interest USACE has received has come from the private sector, particularly nonprofit organizations.

Streamline Permitting Process to Remove Barriers to Recreation

- Amend the challenge cost sharing cooperative management agreements (CCSCMAs) authority granted under the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2016 to allow USACE to handle partner collected fees and return to the partner after processing the contract fees. Additionally, expand the authority to the private sector to facilitate opportunities for businesses and nonprofit organizations to supplement investments in USACE recreation infrastructure.
- Require Department of Commerce and NOAA Fisheries to rescind the West Coast Region's 2018 Guidance on Assessing the Effects of Structures in Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 Consultation and direct the West Coast Region to return to informal consultation maintenance projects.
- Improve interagency coordination to expedite projects in a transparent, timely, and environmentally responsible manner.
- Pass the Recreation Not Red Tape (RNR) Act to make it easier for Americans to experience recreation opportunities.

Why? Lengthy permitting processes for permits, parking passing, and fees can deter visitors from engaging in outdoor recreation activities, and can also result in limited boat slip spaces and complications for construction of public and private access points. Establishing consistent permitting processes that optimize efficiency and effectiveness of regulatory review for projects is critical to ensuring restoration and recreation access in coastal and inland waterway communities across the nation.

Public Boating Access Survey

- Direct the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a survey to provide an inventory of the following: all federally managed recreational boating infrastructure and facilities; an assessment of annual operation and maintenance needs associated with these sites; deferred operation and maintenance needs for such infrastructure and facilities to operate safely at full capacity; opportunities to expand capacity at existing access points; and the economic impact of recreation on regional economies and benefits of sustaining and improving public access at recreational infrastructure and facilities.

Why? One of the largest impediments to boating access is poorly maintained access infrastructure and insufficient support facilities such as parking areas. Despite this industry stakeholders and policymakers lack the necessary resources to determine where investments are needed to expand public boating access. A thorough assessment of annual and deferred operations and maintenance needs and opportunities will significantly increase the American public's ability to access the water.



Bring Federal Recreation Data Management Into the 21st Century

- Harmonize and streamline collection of visitation and economic impact data across the federal land and water management agencies.
- Pass the MAPLAND Act to require land and water management agencies to digitize recreational access information and make it available to the public.

Why? While a few high-level national surveys exist, they don't provide the level of detail required for analysis across agencies. Additionally, investments in better mapping technology make it easier for recreators to find public access points, and they also allow agencies to identify public lands in need of accessible entry points. Digitization of information also helps inform recreationalists about access and watercraft restrictions.

Reassess Personal Watercraft (PWC) Bans in National Park System (NPS)

- NPS should revisit remaining PWC prohibitions in the park system to reevaluate PWC use. This action is in line with the Department of the Interior's mission to optimize opportunities for outdoor recreation on federal lands and waters.

Why? In 2000 the NPS issued a rulemaking prohibiting personal watercraft (PWC) use in all but 21 of its 379 parks and recreation areas. Two decades later, PWCs are a well-established category within recreational boating and have disproved previous notions that PWCs would threaten wildlife habitat, water quality, and pose safety hazards. Continuing these bans without updated assessments enforces an unfairly discriminatory, antiquated rule against today's technology based on past assumptions.

Resiliency & Restoration

Our waterways and outdoor recreation infrastructure need bolstered resilience to the effects of climate change to alleviate the damage that has already been done. Recreational boaters and marine businesses in coastal and inland waterway communities feel the impacts of climate change—including rising sea levels, erosion, and ocean acidification, and more. As a result, our recreational boating access points and facilities are especially at risk. Additionally, the ongoing impacts of climate change have created a growing need in key waterways, such as the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes region, and the Everglades. These restoration efforts are not only important to maintain the ecosystems, but also to sustain the economic impact of the businesses that they support.

Expand Coastal Restoration

- Amend the Gulf of Mexico Security Act of 2006 (GOMESA) through the COASTAL Act (S. 2418) to dedicate more existing offshore energy production revenue from the Gulf towards coastal restoration and resiliency. The COASTAL Act would lift the \$500 million cap on currently shared revenues, and make the formula for revenue distribution of offshore programs consistent with the onshore revenue sharing program by ensuring that Gulf States receive 50% of generated revenue.

Why? Expanding coastal restoration efforts will make the outdoor recreation industry and the many regional economies it supports more resilient in the face of disaster.

ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS TO TAKE:

- » Expand Coastal Restoration
- » Diversify Conservation Revenue
- » Modernize Boating Infrastructure and Access Projects
- » Grow Electric Boat Charging Network
- » Increased Investment in Dredging of Coastal and Inland Waterways
- » Disaster Pre-Mitigation Relief



Diversify Conservation Revenue

- Pass the OFFSHORE Act proposal, which would diversify federal conservation funding by dedicating a portion of offshore wind revenue to coastal resiliency investments, such as projects for wetland restoration, hurricane protection, and infrastructure improvements to protect fish, wildlife, and other natural resources.

Why? Amid the coronavirus pandemic, added damages from natural disasters on already struggling businesses and vulnerable communities sheds light on the need to utilize untapped resources. One such underutilized source of funding is the nation's vast offshore wind energy development revenues, which can help supplement federal and state efforts to protect coastal economies and natural resources.

Modernize Boating Infrastructure and Access Projects

- Amend the Tier 2 (national competitive) Boating Infrastructure Grant Program (BIG) project applications to include a statement on how the proposed project construction can adapt to rising water levels in the surrounding environment.

Why? The BIG program, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) provides much needed grant funding to communities to construct, renovate, and maintain marinas and other boating facilities for outdoor recreation. However, such grants do not require project applications to account for infrastructure resiliency in response to impacts from climate change.

Grow Electric Boat Charging Network

- Develop a grant program to determine where electric recreational vessel charging stations are needed and establish a program to support electric and solar charging station installation at private and public docks and marinas to meet the increasing demand for electric boats.

Why? The recreational boating industry is constantly innovating to minimize the boating community's environmental footprint. There is a surge in interest for electric boats and a growing number of companies are innovating and investing in electric propulsion solutions. Adequate investments in electric and solar charging are essential to support impactful electric propulsion adoption.

Increased Investments in Dredging of Coastal and Inland Waterways

- Prioritize increased funding for navigation projects that support recreation activity in communities vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Why? Coastal and inland waterways that support recreation activity face continued physical changes from the impacts of climate change that can significantly restrict recreation access. As these important waterways continue to face the devastating consequences of rapidly fluctuating water levels and changes to sedimentation processes, sustained, adequate federal investments that prioritize funding for navigation projects are critical to support recreation activity.

Disaster Pre-Mitigation Relief

- Enact the PREPARE Act, which would reauthorize a Small Business Administration loan program to provide small businesses with low-interest, fixed-rate loans of up to \$500,000 to invest in their properties to protect facilities, real estate, and contents from natural disasters.

Why? Small businesses in rural and vulnerable areas often face the brunt of natural disasters: according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), roughly 40–60% of small businesses never reopen following a disaster. Investment in infrastructure for small business also boosts long-term economic strength for these regions; studies have shown that investing in resilient infrastructure saves taxpayers \$6 for every dollar spent.

Increased Financial Resources

Spanning infrastructure access and restoration efforts, we must ensure proper funding for the agencies that maintain our public lands and outdoor recreation facilities. For example, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has over 5,000 sites in 43 states, generating over \$10 billion in economic impact and supporting 189,000 total jobs. The NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries also play an invaluable role in managing recreation and tourism opportunities, and are vital components of local, state, and national economies. Increasing revenues and finding new and sufficient funding streams for these groups will go a long way towards preserving our waterways and the economic impact of outdoor recreation.

Establish USACE FLTP Dedicated Set Aside

- Establish a Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP) dedicated USACE set-aside to ensure critical infrastructure needs are met.

Why? Despite the USACE's extensive number of transportation infrastructure assets and important role attracting recreational visitors, USACE does not receive set-aside funding from the FLTP to improve access to federal lands and waters, while agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the US Forest Service (FS) that attract a smaller share of visitors each year receive this set-aside funding. As USACE deferred maintenance costs continue to stack up, this additional funding would provide critical investments in the highest priority road, bridge, tunnel and parking lot projects that support USACE recreation access points.

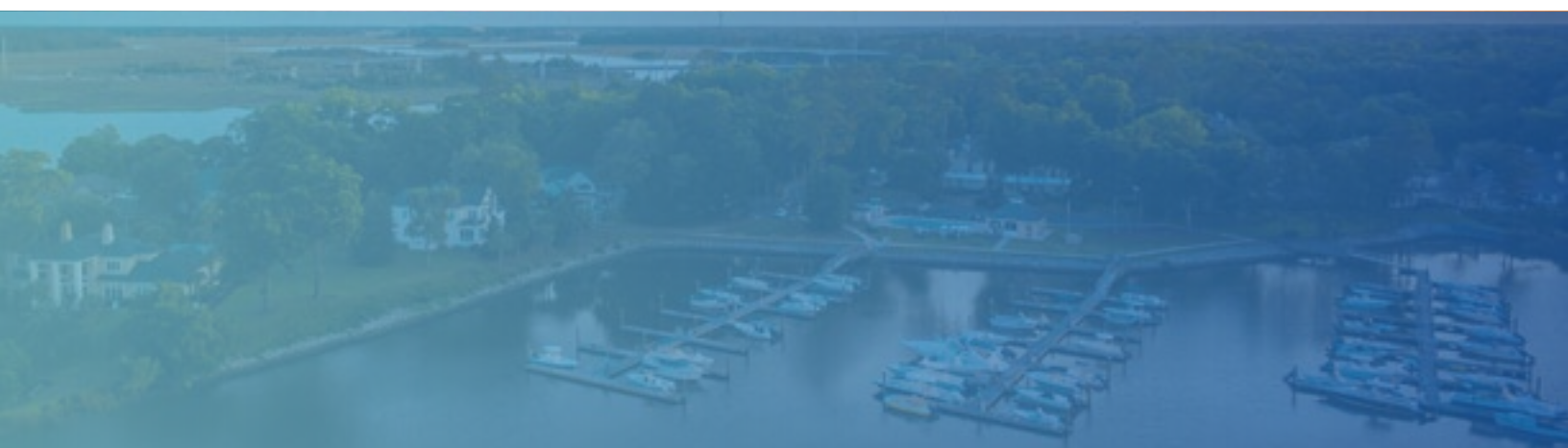
Extend Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) Fee Retention Authorities to USACE

- Extend fee retention authorities under FLREA to USACE.

Why? FLREA allows recreation-providing land management agencies to collect and retain a portion of entrance, camping, parking and other fees. While FLREA has been successful in facilitating reinvestment in revenue-generating recreation infrastructure, the program does not include USACE. Given USACE's economic impact—hosting 270 million recreation visits per year and generating \$11 billion in economic contributions—it's imperative that USACE is provided with a much-needed revenue source to improve the quality of recreational assets and services and address the backlog of maintenance needs.

ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS TO TAKE:

- » Establish USACE FLTP Dedicated Set Aside
 - » Extend Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) Fee Retention Authorities to USACE
 - » Increase USACE Operation, Maintenance, and Care of Existing Recreation Facilities Funding
 - » Enhance and Expand Opportunities for NMS Recreation and Tourism
 - » Everglades Restoration
 - » Great Lakes Restoration
 - » Repair Aging, High-Hazard Potential Dams





Increase USACE Operation, Maintenance, and Care of Existing Recreation Facilities Funding

- Dedicate an additional \$40 million from the USACE Operation and Maintenance account to continue the operation, maintenance, and repair of existing recreation facilities, including unfunded infrastructure maintenance needed to sustain existing facilities at their full capacity.

Why? A recent conditions assessment found that out of 2,780 USACE managed boat ramps, over 60% are in fair to poor condition. Systemic underfunding of USACE recreation facilities and management, and the agency's lack of authority to reinvest recreation fees into revenue-generating infrastructure assets, have allowed this infrastructure to decay in the face of rising demand.

Enhance and Expand Opportunities for NMS Recreation and Tourism

- Supply an additional \$10 million dedicated for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Sanctuaries (NMS) to support investments in infrastructure for outdoor recreation, and \$28 million to enhance the agency's small boat fleet and execute new maintenance plans to extend the life of larger boats.

Why? A lack of investment in necessary infrastructure and resources—such as mooring and navigation buoys, channel signage, dock access, and channel markers—have hindered the full economic potential of NMS' recreation and tourism opportunities. In particular, increased investments in “smart buoys,” which introduce satellites or Wi-Fi to sanctuaries and an expanded NMS personnel fleet would spur modernization and improve visitor safety.

Everglades Restoration

- Include \$725 million in FY2022 for South Florida Ecosystem Restoration and maintain this level of federal investment over the subsequent three fiscal years to finish a suite of critical Everglades restoration projects.

Why? Everglades restoration is a resilience-building water infrastructure program for South Florida that, when complete, will result in 442,000 jobs over the next several decades. The Greater Everglades Ecosystem also supports a substantial part of Florida's \$11 billion recreational fishing industry and \$23.3 billion recreational boating economy that supports 92,211 jobs annually in the state. Everglades restoration delivers a 4:1 return on investment and is estimated to increase residential real estate values in the Everglades region by \$16.1 billion. According to the federal government's own estimates, by investing more now, the government can save the American taxpayers over \$2 billion on the overall cost of Everglades restoration.

Great Lakes Restoration

- Increase authorized Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding to \$375 million in FY 2022 and \$25 million more per year until 2026, which works to protect and restore the Great Lakes through the prevention of AIS, reduction of nutrient runoff that contributes to harmful algal blooms, and restoration of habitat to protect native species.

Why? The Great Lakes region is home to more than 3 million boaters, and a strengthened GLRI should expand efforts to address erosion by utilizing living shorelines to prevent damage from high water levels and greater wave action. Additionally, a continued, substantial investment is needed for GLRI to help combat costly AIS, which costs the government billions of dollars each year. According to the federal government's own estimates, by investing more now, the government can save the American taxpayers over \$2 billion on the overall cost of Everglades restoration.

Repair Aging, High-Hazard Potential Dams

- Invest \$45 billion to repair aging, yet critical, high-hazard potential dams.

Why? Many boating access points and marine businesses are located in close proximity to dams, making dam collapses very dangerous and costly for recreational boaters and marine businesses. Moreover, dam failure floodwaters can have significant negative environmental implications, including marine habitat destruction and disbursement of marine debris downstream.