



June 8, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Joe Manchin
Ranking Member, Senate Committee
on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Chairman Murkowski, and Ranking Member Manchin:

As the Senate proceeds with consideration of the *Great American Outdoors (GAO) Act* (S.3422), we urge you to retain your role in safeguarding public lands for the future of all Americans.

As introduced, the *GAO Act*, and every other bill that preceded it that contained similar provisions, is an irresponsible way to fix a very real problem. Currently, land management agencies like the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management face a staggering backlog of much-needed maintenance. Without question federally-owned and operated infrastructure needs serious attention, but the *GAO Act* does not provide a meaningful and lasting solution.

Federal agencies currently have more assets than they can afford to maintain. The *GAO Act* simultaneously recognizes and attempts to address this while also providing hundreds of millions of dollars each year for the government to buy more land through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This approach is counterproductive and will result in a larger federal estate that will require increasing maintenance over time. It's also worth noting that the bill does nothing to change the way federal agencies prioritize maintenance of assets so that history does not repeat itself. Simply providing funding without action to prevent future maintenance backlogs will only result in compounding maintenance challenges.

Section 2 of the bill provides funding for maintenance on the assets the government already owns and cannot afford to fund, while immediately allowing for hundreds of millions of dollars allotted to new acquisitions in Section 3. When Congress permanently authorized LWCF in

2019, there was the recognition that Congress still had a responsibility to safeguard the American landscape and the American taxpayer against irresponsible spending. This responsibility was to be carried out through the annual appropriations process, during which Congress would evaluate proposed land acquisitions and determine the appropriate level of funding. Now, the Senate is poised to willingly abdicate their oversight of federal land acquisition, while providing the maximum amount of funding allowable into perpetuity.

The *GAO Act* provides for \$900 million in mandatory funding for LWCF as a whole, meaning that at least 40 percent, or \$360 million, each year will be eligible to buy land resources across the country. The federal government already owns more than 640 million acres, controlling a vast majority of the American West. More federal ownership is irresponsible, and in some places it will soon be impossible. In Nevada, federal agencies currently own more than 85 percent of the landscape, leaving precious little to support private enterprise.

To be clear, this bill radically increases the burden on the American taxpayer for years to come. Congress will still be required to confront federal maintenance needs, including mounting deferred maintenance costs, through the annual appropriations process. There will be fewer maintenance dollars to go around, meaning fewer dollars will be directed to parks in Maine, refuges in Wisconsin, and forests in Florida. If passed, the *GAO Act* sentences hundreds of millions of acres of American land and water to a poorly-managed future. We understand some of the historic benefits that have resulted from LWCF funding in local communities through the use of state-side funding. We also acknowledge that sometimes, acquisition can provide continuity for discrete landscape. We do not, however, believe that acquisition on this scale would be anything but an utter failure by Congress to perform its oversight role.

Consideration of this bill comes at a time when Congress has recently provided trillions of dollars in much-needed aid to individuals, businesses, and communities nationwide as a result of COVID-19. To add billions of dollars to mandatory spending for LWCF is both irresponsible for future Americans who will be forced to confront American debt, and irresponsible for the resource.

We stand ready to work with you to find a more responsible way to confront these challenges and urge you and your colleagues to oppose the *GAO Act*.

Sincerely,

American Sheep Industry Association
Association of National Grasslands
National Cattlemen's Beef Association
Public Lands Council
Arizona Cattle Growers' Association
Arizona Cattle Feeders Association
California Cattlemen's Association

California Wool Growers Association
Colorado Cattlemen's Association
Colorado Public Lands Council
Colorado Wool Growers Association
Florida Cattlemen's Association
Idaho Cattle Association
Idaho Wool Growers Association
Indiana Beef Cattle Association
Indiana Sheep Association
Iowa Cattlemen's Association
Kansas Livestock Association
Louisiana Cattlemen's Association
Maryland Cattlemen's Association
Minnesota State Cattlemen's Association
Montana Public Lands Council
Montana Wool Growers Association
Nebraska Cattlemen's Association
Nevada Cattlemen's Association
New Mexico Cattle Growers Association
New Mexico Wool Growers, Inc.
North Carolina Cattlemen's Association
North Dakota Lamb & Wool Producers Association
North Dakota Stockmen's Association
Ohio Cattlemen's Association
Oregon Cattlemen's Association
Oregon Public Lands Council
South Dakota Cattlemen's Association
South Dakota Public Lands Council
South Dakota Sheep Growers Association
South Dakota Stock Growers Association
Texas Sheep & Goat Raisers Association
Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association
Utah Cattlemen's Association
Utah Wool Growers Association
Virginia Cattlemen's Association
Virginia Sheep Producers Association
Washington Cattlemen's Association
West Virginia Cattlemen's Association
Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association
Wyoming Stock Growers Association
Wyoming Wool Growers Association