

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
The Restoration Economy: Examining Environmental and Economic Opportunities
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Chair Haaland and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join this forum on *The Restoration Economy: Examining Environmental and Economic Opportunities*. My name is Brent Keith and I am the senior policy advisor for lands on The Nature Conservancy's North America Policy & Government Relations team.

The Nature Conservancy has more than 65 years of experience working with private landowners, and federal, state, local, and Tribal governments across the nation and in 79 countries and territories to deliver on our mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

At the outset, I would like to say thank you on behalf of The Nature Conservancy and our more than one million members for your continued efforts and leadership in working to enact the Great American Outdoors Act. We are on the precipice of making a truly historic investment in the maintenance of our National Parks and public lands and, for the first time in its more than half a century history, delivering full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This is no small feat, and we aren't done yet, but thank you for your work to help us reach this critical stage.

As we gather today for this virtual forum on the restoration economy, we are all keenly aware that the nation and the world continue to grapple with unparalleled challenges and uncertainty stemming from the pandemic as well as an awakening to deep, systemic injustice throughout modern society. At the same time, nature continues to be at risk, with alarming levels of deforestation, accelerating biodiversity losses, chronic droughts and extreme flooding, a warming ocean, and more.

Despite all of this, there is hope. Research of The Nature Conservancy and others presents hopeful possibilities to address climate change, to restore ecosystems, and to improve water quality while also meeting the health, welfare and livelihood needs of people in the United States and across the globe. These possibilities depend upon conservation, ecosystem restoration, and changes in land and water management practices, along with necessary changes in energy and transportation systems, infrastructure planning and design, and other pathways to a low-carbon economy.

Initial and ongoing stimulus measures are, appropriately, focused on supporting public health systems, as well as job protection and social welfare. As we shift to broader recovery efforts it is imperative that we invest in conservation and work to unlock the full potential of the restoration

economy. My colleague and TNC's Chief External Affairs Officer Lynn Scarlett often says, "nature is not just nice; it is essential."

As we embark on the effort to rebuild and reshape our country and economy, there are several important principles to keep in mind. If we are to build a more sustainable world for the future, we must recover toward a carbon-neutral, nature-positive economy; uphold foundational environmental laws; ensure robust mitigation for infrastructure impacts on nature; invest in green infrastructure; transition to more sustainable agriculture; be mindful of social responsibility and equity; and finally, support the restoration of healthy ecosystems throughout the country

Natural ecosystems bring a wealth of benefits, including infrastructure services; they drive the tourism and outdoor recreation economy; and could contribute up to a third of the near-term climate mitigation needs to keep the world well below 2 degrees warming. Additionally, evidence from the 2008-2009 financial crisis response measures in the US shows that environmental restoration has one of the highest rates of job creation per million dollars of stimulus among any of the sectors analyzed. New research indicates that the Land and Water Conservation Fund supports between 17 and 31 jobs for every \$1 million of expenditures.¹

LWCF investments have had a direct impact on growing the outdoor recreation economy by increasing recreational access to public lands in every state and county in America. Increased public access to our national parks, forests, refuges, local and state parks, and other public lands means increased seasonal visitation and tourism and thus more spending in local communities. Likewise, the Restore Our Parks portion of the Great American Outdoors Act carries huge recovery opportunities. Investment in fixing National Park sites could generate nearly 110,000 additional infrastructure related jobs

Federal agencies, the outdoor recreation community, and academic analysts have all documented the direct economic benefits of federal (and state) public lands. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that outdoor recreation generates some \$887 billion annually in consumer spending and supports 7.6 million jobs in the U.S. economy.² The National Parks Conservation Association estimates that some \$13 billion flows annually to towns that are gateways to National Parks.

These economic benefits are enormous and important. But they miss another significant contribution of public lands and conservation: increasingly, as this nation has become what economist Ray Rasker refers to as a "knowledge-based economy" of finance, marketing, design, and management, he notes that the "bulk of the economic value of public lands lies in its ability to attract people—and their businesses—who want to live near protected lands for quality of life reasons." (Rasker, 2009, "Economic Benefits of the LWCF").

I recognize that others on this panel will talk more about a renewed and expanded civilian conservation corps, and I would wholeheartedly support such efforts. Over the last five years, The Nature Conservancy has worked extensively to develop, design and implement a region-wide, five-state conservation corps program in the Gulf of Mexico region, the—GulfCorps. Given our experience with GulfCorps, other conservation corps and federal conservation

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341554349_Employment_Impacts_of_Conservation_Spending

² <https://outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/>

programs across the country, TNC has recommendations for the design of improved and expanded “civilian conservation corps” program initiatives being considered by Congress – recommendations focusing on creating real pathways for careers in conservation, especially for groups now under-represented in this career field, rigorous technical training, and a focus on science-based projects - leveraging where possible existing local, state, Tribal, and federal conservation and restoration plans.

The Nature Conservancy has deep experience with large landscape conservation, but we know that we all need to do more in the face of significant species decline stemming from habitat destruction. That is why we have developed new science to identify resilient and connected landscapes across the U.S. to better focus our conservation efforts, and we continue innovating to expand the suite of conservation finance options. One recent example is the Cumberland Forest Project. Spanning more than 250,000 acres of working forestland across Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, this project seeks to implement sustainable forestry across the landscape to benefit local economies, wildlife habitat, provide clean water and climate resilience by protecting a globally significant biodiversity hotspot.

As I previously mentioned, The Nature Conservancy is also focused on ensuring robust mitigation for infrastructure and other development impacts on nature. Compensatory mitigation is the most significant source of funding for restoration in the U.S., directing an estimated \$4.68 billion annually directly to protection and restoration. Mitigation and the offsets provided through compensation are a critical mechanism in meeting the world’s biodiversity conservation goals.

Additionally, The Nature Conservancy has led in restoration of oyster reefs, restoration of streams and also restoration of our forests. These labor-intensive jobs are essential to restoring ecosystem process and function and also deliver some of the highest rates of return in regard to job creation.

The United States is fortunate to have some of the most spectacular landscapes in the world. But they are far more than beautiful vistas and vacation destinations. They are critical resources that maintain livelihoods, communities and economies—their value includes, but goes far beyond, the outdoor recreation dollars they generate or the commodities they provide. Healthy forests, rivers and coasts benefit people by providing clean, abundant water supplies, storm surge protection, flood prevention and mitigation, reduced risk of wildfires, carbon sequestration, and many other services. Investing in conservation and restoration of these lands and waters can play a critical role in helping America recover while also making progress in shifting us toward a more sustainable future where people and nature can both thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this forum. I look forward to the discussion.