

March 30, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer, Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

We thank you for your tireless and selfless work to protect the nation during this time of crisis. We recognize the personal sacrifice you are all making to continue serving this country and doing all that you can to protect the health and well-being of all Americans. Passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (the CARES Act) is a tremendous accomplishment and rightfully directs aid to the health care industry to help it tackle the pandemic, citizens who are out of work and businesses forced to shut down. Now is the time to turn to investments that will stimulate and invest in our nation's economy.

The conservation of lands and waters is not an optional amenity but the cornerstone of thriving economies. Conserved natural lands and waters form an important basis for jobs and small businesses and help keep communities healthy and safe while reducing costs and pressure on public infrastructure. Likewise, clean energy investments create jobs, economic development and savings for all citizens. For additional background on the jobs and economic impacts of these investments, see the attached summary.

#### **Great American Outdoors Act (S.3422)**

Our nation's public lands, and the recreation access and opportunities they provide, are essential national assets for American families, sportsmen and women and the indomitable American character. They also represent a vital economic driver that has helped propel national and regional economic growth in times of expansion, stabilize the economy in more challenging times and lead the way to recovery after previous downturns.

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) — led in the Senate by Sens. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., and Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and supported by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and 59 bipartisan cosponsors — was recently introduced to deliver positive economic impacts across the country. The GAOA bill brings together the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund. President Donald Trump has urged swift passage of the bill.

LWCF protects federal lands by providing additional access, given increased demand on our country's open spaces. LWCF also provides grants to states to invest in working forests, state parks and habitat conservation on non-federal lands. The GAOA bill will also provide critically needed investment in our nation's federal land infrastructure by providing funding for maintenance to the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Indian Education. This funding will reduce the deferred maintenance backlog on public lands.

#### **Transportation Infrastructure**

Investing in our nation's transportation infrastructure is essential and will result in significant job creation and economic development. Given the substantial progress on advancing transportation legislation this Congress, such legislation should be included in the next coronavirus response bill. The America's Transportation Infrastructure Act of 2019 (S.2302), which we support, unanimously passed the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. We have also constructively engaged with members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, as they have been diligently drafting their own bill. Many of the positive provisions included in S.2302 should be retained in any final transportation legislation, such as ensuring that investments enhance the resilience of transportation infrastructure

and enable consideration of natural infrastructure, funding wildlife crossings that help enhance the safety of our highways and roads and reducing emissions from the transportation sector, including investing in electric and alternative fuel vehicle infrastructure.

### **Clean Energy Tax Credits**

There is an array of clean energy tax credits that are vital for both moving toward a clean energy economy and driving job creation, including the section 45 production tax credit, the section 48 investment tax credit and the 45Q tax credit. Disruptions in global supply chains and a downturn in tax equity investment could severely impact the deployment of clean energy projects, just as they will affect other sectors of the economy. Congress should consider both the extension of existing tax credits as well as additional flexibility in use of tax credits, such as implementing a direct pay mechanism to ensure the clean energy sector continues to thrive and contributes to the nation's economic recovery.

### **Department of Energy**

**Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP):** The WAP helps low-income families and other vulnerable citizens reduce energy use in their homes, allowing them to spend their limited resources on food, health care and other essentials. Funding from WAP is directed to all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. territories where local partner agencies are contracted to do the work. Because these contracts and partnerships are already in place, additional funds can be utilized quickly to ramp up work and provide additional energy savings and local employment benefits.

**Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG):** The EECBG program, created under the 2007 Energy Independence and Security Act, can provide grants and technical assistance directly to state, local and tribal governments to support energy efficiency and conservation efforts. Because funding is granted directly to local and state governments, funds can be directed more easily to support local employment and eligible projects in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. territories. A new round of EECBG funds should put greater emphasis on transportation investments with at least 50% of funds dedicated to electric vehicle charging infrastructure or other transportation electrification programs.

### **Department of Agriculture – Forest Service**

Restoration, construction and maintenance work are needed within our forests, whether to improve roads, reduce wildfire risk or increase the ability of our forests to capture and store carbon. These efforts have great potential to provide many job opportunities. The following forest-related economic development investment recommendations would support quality jobs while enhancing forest health and resilience.

It is also imperative to consider our country's readiness to fight wildfires in the COVID-19 context. It is critical that Congress ensure sufficient resources are available as the wildfire season begins, especially in the West. Federal, state and local wildland firefighting departments across the country will need support to ensure firefighters are able to mobilize and coordinate in a safe manner.

**Capital Improvement and Maintenance:** The Forest Service is the largest federal land and road manager in the lower 48 states and responsible for maintaining more than 375,000 miles of roads, more than 12,000 bridges and 143,000 miles of trails. The Forest Service has a maintenance backlog of more than \$5 billion, which does not include most of the roads system. Funding for this account goes to construction and maintenance of roads and facilities, as well as forest thinning and restoration. Most of the funding goes to local contractors, which helps local economies.

**National Forest System:** There are approximately 80 million acres of national forest lands in need of restoration, including wildfire risk reduction, and many projects are already "NEPA-ready." The Forest Service should be directed to focus on the highest-priority projects and the numerous collaboratively developed projects within each region. Hazardous fuels reduction work often relies on contractors and is labor intensive and has many co-benefits to improve forest health while protecting communities from catastrophic fires.

**State and Private Forestry:** States have invested much time in their state forest action plans (SFAPs). Grant funding for states would help to prioritize SFAPs that focus on fuels reduction, forest health, urban trees and other projects. This infusion of funding would primarily support rural jobs but also urban jobs.

### **Department of the Interior**

**Wildland Fire Management:** The Department of the Interior is responsible for risk reduction on more than 420 million acres it manages and another 55 million acres of tribal lands held under trust. Like the Forest Service, investments focused on highest-priority fuels management would result in boots on the ground, restored landscapes and safer communities and water supplies.

### **Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**

**Regional Conservation Partnership Program:** The Regional Conservation Partnership Program co-invests with partners to implement on-farm, watershed and regional natural resource projects. The program promotes the coordination of NRCS conservation activities with a wide variety of partners and brings the private sector to the conservation table. Projects range from working with local coastal communities and restaurants, to building a shellfish hatchery, to addressing irrigation efficiency and water management in the West.

Additional programs, such as the **NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program**, should also be funded to increase the ability of communities to quickly address damages to infrastructure and land caused by flooding, which is forecasted for areas within the Mississippi River basin this spring.

### **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)**

**Construction and Operations and Maintenance Accounts:** There is currently a roughly \$98 billion backlog of USACE-authorized construction activities. This is work that has generally been approved and is ready for investment. Clearly there is a tremendous need for USACE construction and the associated operations and maintenance. Our nation's dams, levees and locks are aging and failing. Investments in water-related infrastructure are needed to save lives, ensure movement of goods and reduce risk to property and infrastructure. Natural, nature-based and related construction and restoration work should be considered and can be used to ensure investments are resilient. Natural infrastructure has been shown to be both effective and cost effective. Investments in USACE's ecosystem restoration and flood risk reduction projects in particular produce multiple benefits for job creation, risk reduction and community enhancements.

### **Bureau of Reclamation**

Like USACE, the Bureau of Reclamation invests in critical water infrastructure that drives economic activity. Investments in the Bureau of Reclamation can help deliver on-the-ground water infrastructure solutions. Similar to the USACE work, natural and nature-based solutions should be considered as effective and cost effective and a way to boost the resilience of those investments. Existing programs have a backlog of projects that could be funded with an economic development investment.

### **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)**

**Ocean and Coastal Restoration:** Coastal wetlands and nearshore waters produce the fish and shellfish that feed America and support the economic and social well-being of those who live, work and recreate in coastal communities. Additionally, the restoration and protection of coastal resources — such as salt marshes, oyster reefs, seagrass meadows and coral reefs — help provide flood control and prevent erosion to protect our communities from storm surges and provide important socioeconomic benefits.<sup>1</sup> Restoration activities as a result of previous investments supported 2,280 jobs, including environmental professionals, consultants, engineers, construction workers, geologists, project managers, fishermen, biologists and divers.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conservation Job Training Opportunities**

Through the Corporation for National and Community Service, approximately 75,000 **AmeriCorps** members are currently serving in communities across the country, including contributing to energy efficiency, coastal conservation, disaster resilience, forest management and ecosystem restoration projects. **Job Corps** is another effort administered by the Department of Labor and Forest Service that includes civilian conservation centers supporting forestry-related efforts. In addition, NOAA supports programs focused on job creation and training through the **Coastal Conservation Corps** and **Veterans Conservation Corps**. For instance, the successful GulfCorps initiative is part of this effort and

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<sup>1</sup> Abt Associates. 2014. Estimating the Change in Ecosystem Service Values from Coastal Restoration. [https://www.abtassociates.com/sites/default/files/migrated\\_files/1d3da4ac-9f10-4583-90bf-0f6cb2eafdc0\\_0.pdf](https://www.abtassociates.com/sites/default/files/migrated_files/1d3da4ac-9f10-4583-90bf-0f6cb2eafdc0_0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Samonte et al. 2017. Socioeconomic Benefits of Habitat Restoration. NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OHC-1. <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/15030>

could easily be expanded to additional projects and areas. We support emergency investments and provisions that help national service programs and their members continue to serve communities during this pandemic and throughout the subsequent recovery to best of their abilities.

**Federal Emergency Management Agency**

**Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC):** For every dollar invested in disaster risk reduction actions, an average of \$7 is saved from reduced flood risk.<sup>3</sup> Acting before any specific disaster promotes and facilitates planning and measures that increase resilience and reduce risk. Congress created the BRIC program in the Disaster Recovery Reform Act in 2018, which is funded by up to 6% set aside from the Disaster Relief Fund. Additional funds should be appropriated in a coronavirus response bill that would go toward work that enhances resilience of structures and infrastructure and invests in nature-based restoration work that is known to enhance resilience, such as floodplain and coastal wetland, mangrove, reef and coral restoration.

Sincerely,



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The Nature Conservancy  
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cc: The Honorable Richard Shelby, Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate  
The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate  
The Honorable Nita Lowey, Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives  
The Honorable Kay Granger, Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives

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<sup>3</sup> National Institute of Building Sciences, Mitigation Saves.  
[https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nibs.org/resource/resmgr/docs/MS\\_Grants-Flood.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nibs.org/resource/resmgr/docs/MS_Grants-Flood.pdf)

## **ATTACHMENT: Economic Benefits of Conservation and Clean Energy Investments**

The economic benefits of conservation include a strong return on investment, with a national average of \$4 returned in natural services for every \$1 invested. This return can be as high as \$11 in individual states. The outdoor recreation economy contributes \$887 billion in consumer spending annually, creating 7.62 million jobs, and local public parks and recreation agencies can generate \$145 billion in economic activity annually.<sup>4</sup> Nature can also provide savings to cities, including more than \$23.2 billion in coastal storm protection annually.<sup>5</sup>

In 2019, the energy efficiency sector continued to produce the most new jobs of any energy sector — adding more than 54,000 new jobs in a sector with 2,324,866 total jobs. Nearly 56% of energy efficiency employees worked at construction firms in 2019, installing or servicing energy efficiency goods or performing related services. Overall, nearly 510,000 employees work in zero-emission technology industries, including more than 345,000 in the solar industry and more than 114,000 in the wind industry.<sup>6</sup> Energy assistance investments, such as weatherization, provide \$4 in benefits for every \$1 of federal investment. Each year, the WAP supports 8,500 jobs across the U.S., using local, professionally trained crews to install energy and water efficiency measures.

In addition, the domestic ecological restoration sector directly employs approximately 126,000 workers and generates approximately \$9.5 billion in sales annually. It also supports an additional 95,000 jobs and \$15 billion in economic output through indirect business-to-business and increased household spending benefits.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Outdoor Industry Association, Southwick Associates (2017). The Outdoor Recreation Economy. <https://outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/>

<sup>5</sup> Wilson Morris A, Thomas SL (2018) The Economic, Health, and Social Benefits of Conservation. <https://ournaturalinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Our-Natural-Interest-Research-Report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NASEO, EFI (2020). The 2020 U.S. Energy & Employment Report. <https://www.usenergyjobs.org/>

<sup>7</sup> BenDor T, Lester TW, Livengood A, Davis A, Yonavjak L (2015) Estimating the Size and Impact of the Ecological Restoration Economy. PLoS ONE 10(6):e0128339.doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0128339