



July 2021

# FEDERAL LANDS AND WATERS

## Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation Is Limited



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

# GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-592](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies provide outdoor recreation opportunities and facilities on the hundreds of millions acres of lands and waters they manage, attracting hundreds of millions of visitors annually. These agencies include the seven that comprised the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation: the Army Corps of Engineers, BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, National Park Service, and NOAA. However, federal agencies are not required to track spending for outdoor recreation, and it is unclear how much federal funding is spent, through various programs, on recreation.

The joint explanatory statement accompanying the Department of the Interior's fiscal year 2020 appropriation included a provision for GAO to conduct a study that identifies programs carried out by federal agencies that directly impact the outdoor recreation sector and that presents federal spending information for these programs. This report provides available information on what selected federal agencies know about their outdoor recreation spending.

GAO focused on the seven council member agencies; reviewed available data and documents on agency spending or funding that supports outdoor recreation; and interviewed agency officials to understand how, if at all, each agency identified its spending that supports outdoor recreation.

View [GAO-21-592](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or [andersonn@gao.gov](mailto:andersonn@gao.gov).

July 2021

## FEDERAL LANDS AND WATERS

### Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation Is Limited

## What GAO Found

The information that the seven federal agencies GAO reviewed have about their spending that supports outdoor recreation varies and is not intended to fully or precisely reflect all agency spending on recreation. The Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service identified budget lines related to outdoor recreation, although officials said this information may not accurately reflect the agencies' overall recreation spending. This is because some programs can support multiple purposes, so it can be difficult to determine how to divide a program's costs among its different purposes. For example, through its navigation program, the Army Corps of Engineers manages navigation locks, which benefit both commercial and recreational travel. The Bureau of Reclamation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) did not identify budget lines related to outdoor recreation.

#### Examples of Outdoor Recreation Activities on Federal Lands and Waters



Sources: (left to right) Neal Herbert/National Park Service; Forest Service; Fish and Wildlife Service. | GAO-21-592

Some agencies in our review provided spending information, while others provided funding information. The Army Corps of Engineers and Forest Service provided spending (expenditure) information, and BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service provided funding (allotment) information. Funding represents amounts available to the agencies at a particular time but not necessarily actual spending.

- The Army Corps of Engineers' annual spending for its recreation program budget line averaged about \$292 million for fiscal years 2010 through 2019.
- The Forest Service's annual spending for its budget lines that it identified as supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$225 million for fiscal years 2014 through 2019.
- BLM's annual funding for its budget lines that it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$77 million for fiscal years 2010 through 2019.
- The Fish and Wildlife Service's annual funding for its budget lines that it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$1.3 billion for fiscal years 2010 through 2019.
- The National Park Service's annual funding for its budget lines that it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$1.5 billion for fiscal years 2010 through 2019.

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## Abbreviations

BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CRS	Congressional Research Service
GOMESA	Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OMB	Office of Management and Budget

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July 21, 2021

### Congressional Committees

Federal agencies provide outdoor recreation opportunities and facilities on the more than 600 million acres of land they manage, attracting hundreds of millions of visitors annually.<sup>1</sup> Outdoor recreation is an important driver of economic activity, contributing \$459.8 billion to the U.S. economy (2.1 percent of gross domestic product) in 2019.<sup>2</sup> However, federal agencies are not required to track their spending on outdoor recreation, and it is unclear how much they spend, through various programs, on recreation.<sup>3</sup>

Agencies that provide outdoor recreation opportunities include the seven agencies that comprised the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation—a now-inactive federal interagency coordinating and decision-making body for federal agencies whose missions or programs

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), total federal land in the United States is not definitively known because joint management of some areas, or the inclusion of lands under easements or leases, could adjust this figure. See CRS, *Federal Lands and Related Resources: Overview and Selected Issues for the 116th Congress*, R43429 (Washington, D.C.: April 2019). In addition, federal agencies manage hundreds of millions of acres of submerged lands and waters.

<sup>2</sup>Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2019*, BEA 20–56 (Suitland, MD: Nov. 10, 2020). The Bureau of Economic Analysis defines outdoor recreation as all recreational activities undertaken for pleasure that occur outdoors, such as fishing, hiking, off-road vehicle riding, and bird watching.

<sup>3</sup>The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is required to publish a list of all federal programs, along with related budget and performance information (Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 7, 124 Stat. 3866, 3876 (2011) (codified at 31 U.S.C § 1122). OMB reports budgetary and financial data in the Public Budget Database; see <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/BUDGET-2021-DB/context>. OMB classifies programs by functions and subfunctions, and there is a subfunction for recreational resources, which includes acquisition, improvement, and operation of recreational lands and facilities and preservation of historic areas. Each federal activity is placed in a single functional classification that best defines the activity's most important purpose, even though many activities serve more than one purpose. See GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: September 2005). We have previously reported on limitations of OMB's inventory of federal programs. See GAO, *Government Efficiency and Effectiveness: Inconsistent Definitions and Information Limit the Usefulness of Federal Program Inventories*, GAO-15-83 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 31, 2014). In addition, the Bureau of Economic Analysis has reported summary information related to expenditures for outdoor recreation. See Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 20–56.

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include providing outdoor recreation and conserving or managing natural and cultural resources. The seven agencies are the Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and National Park Service. The Great American Outdoors Act, enacted in August 2020, made changes to how some of these agencies fund projects and activities supporting outdoor recreation. Specifically, the law created a new fund in the Treasury to pay for priority deferred maintenance projects on federal lands managed by BLM, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service and made permanent another source of funding that some agencies can use for activities that support outdoor recreation.<sup>4</sup>

The joint explanatory statement accompanying the Department of the Interior's fiscal year 2020 appropriation included a provision for GAO to conduct a study that identifies programs carried out by federal agencies that directly impact the outdoor recreation sector and that presents federal spending information for these programs.<sup>5</sup> This report provides available information on what selected federal agencies know about their outdoor recreation spending.<sup>6</sup>

To describe what selected federal agencies know about their spending that supports outdoor recreation, we focused on the seven agencies that

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<sup>4</sup>Pub. L. No. 116-152, 134 Stat. 682 (2020). Specifically, the act created the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund in the Treasury and made permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The act directed a certain amount of revenues from oil, gas, coal, or alternative or renewable energy development on federal land and water into the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund for priority deferred maintenance projects on land managed by BLM, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. This fund can also be used for priority deferred maintenance on Bureau of Indian Education Schools. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is a U.S. Treasury fund used by BLM, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service for several purposes, including conserving natural resources and enhancing outdoor recreation opportunities on federal, state, and private lands. The Army Corps of Engineers and NOAA are not eligible to receive money from these funds.

<sup>5</sup>165 Cong. Rec. H11061, H11282 (Dec. 17, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>This report focuses on federal programs and spending that have a positive impact on outdoor recreation. It does not discuss federal programs and spending that may have negative impacts on outdoor recreation (e.g., mining or timber harvest).

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were part of the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation.<sup>7</sup> We interviewed officials at these seven agencies to understand how, if at all, each agency could identify their spending that supported outdoor recreation. We requested and analyzed readily available data for fiscal years 2010 through 2019 from the agencies' data systems or existing documents and related documentation. The information the agencies provided is not based on a uniform definition of activities that support outdoor recreation. We did not assess the agencies' rationales for including or excluding particular activities. Some agencies provided spending information, while others provided funding information. In this report, the term "spending" refers to expenditures, and the term "funding" refers to allotments.<sup>8</sup> Funding represents an amount available at a particular time (e.g., during a fiscal year) but does not necessarily reflect actual spending that occurred. Unless otherwise stated, we report spending and funding data in nominal terms (i.e., not adjusted for inflation). The spending and funding information we report is not intended to fully or precisely reflect an agency's spending or funding for outdoor recreation because, for example, some programs can support multiple purposes, so it can be difficult to determine how to divide a program's costs among its different purposes. Because each agency included different activities when identifying their spending or funding on outdoor recreation, the information is not comparable across the agencies. As a result, we do not report the sum of spending or funding across the seven agencies; instead, we report data separately for each agency. We found these data and estimates sufficiently reliable for presenting available data on selected agencies' spending and funding that supports outdoor recreation, noting the limitations of these data.

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<sup>7</sup>Other federal agencies also have programs that may support outdoor recreation. For example, the Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration has a Recreational Trails Program, which makes apportionments to states that must be used for recreational trails and related projects. Additionally, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grants allow states to use funds to purchase land to use as a park to benefit the surrounding community.

<sup>8</sup>An expenditure is an outlay, the actual spending of money. An allotment is an authorization by either the agency head or another authorized employee to his or her subordinates to incur obligations within a specified amount. An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received, or a legal duty on the part of the United States that could mature into a legal liability by virtue of actions on the part of the other party beyond the control of the United States.

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For agencies that identified budget lines that support outdoor recreation (Army Corps of Engineers, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service), we requested and analyzed data for those budget lines.<sup>9</sup> The Army Corps of Engineers and Forest Service provided expenditure data for their budget lines that they identified as supporting outdoor recreation. BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service provided funding data for their budget lines primarily focused on managing recreation. The agencies had previously identified these budget lines to estimate their funding for outdoor recreation in a Department of the Interior 2014 report to Congress.<sup>10</sup> BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service also provided information on recreation fees they collected or spent each year. Each agency retains the fees it collects to spend on certain activities.<sup>11</sup>

For agencies that did not identify budget lines that support outdoor recreation (Bureau of Reclamation and NOAA), we interviewed officials to understand the agencies' activities that support outdoor recreation and whether they could estimate their spending that supported outdoor recreation.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2020 to July 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>9</sup>For the purposes of this report, "budget lines" refers to programs or activities that agencies identify as line items in their budget justifications or to programs identified as business lines in annual financial reports.

<sup>10</sup>Department of the Interior, *Report to Congress: Public Access for Hunting, Fishing, Shooting, and other Recreational Activities on Public Lands* (Washington, D.C.: October 2014).

<sup>11</sup>The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act authorizes five agencies to charge and collect recreation fees at federal recreation lands and waters—BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service. Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. J, tit. VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377 (2004) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801-6814). The agencies retain the collected fees, which are available for expenditure without further appropriation. The fees are used primarily for on-site improvements, such as the repair, maintenance, and enhancement of facilities. The act does not authorize the Army Corps of Engineers or NOAA to charge and collect recreation fees.



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## Background

The seven agencies we examined have a variety of missions, and the importance of outdoor recreation to those missions differs among the agencies.

- **Army Corps of Engineers.** The Corps balances both military and civilian responsibilities. Through its Civil Works Program, the Corps constructs, operates, and maintains a wide range of water resources development projects—such as projects to improve navigation and reduce flood risk. These projects may also benefit outdoor recreation, and the agency provides public facilities for boating, camping, fishing, hiking, picnicking, swimming, and wildlife watching on 12 million acres of lands and waters.
- **Bureau of Land Management.** BLM manages 244 million acres of land for multiple uses, including recreation; range; timber; minerals; watershed; wildlife and fish; natural scenic, scientific, and historical values; and the sustained yield of renewable resources. This includes about 35 million acres of National Conservation Lands, which include wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, national scenic and historic trails, and national monuments and conservation areas.<sup>12</sup>
- **Bureau of Reclamation.** Reclamation’s mission is to manage, develop, and protect water and water-related resources in 17 western states. Reclamation has led or provided assistance in the construction of most of the large dams and water diversion structures in the West to develop water supplies for irrigation, municipal water use, flood control, and habitat enhancement. Reclamation projects include approximately 8 million acres of land and water that are, for the most part, available for public outdoor recreation.
- **Fish and Wildlife Service.** The Fish and Wildlife Service manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of lands and waters

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<sup>12</sup>The Wilderness Act established a national system of federally owned land that is congressionally designated as areas to be preserved in a wilderness condition. Pub. L. No. 88-577, 78 Stat. 890 (1964) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 1131-1136). The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was established in 1968 by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to preserve free-flowing rivers and protect them for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. Pub. L. No. 90-542, 82 Stat. 906 (1968) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 1271-1287). The National Trails System Act established a national system of trails to provide outdoor recreational opportunities. Pub. L. No. 90-543, 82 Stat. 919 (1968) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 1241-1251). Most of the national monuments BLM manages were established pursuant to the Antiquities Act of 1906 (54 U.S.C. §§ 320301-320303), which authorizes the President to declare historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest on lands owned or controlled by the federal government to be national monuments. National Conservation Areas are designated by statute, which specifies the purpose and management of the area.

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that provides for the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats, as well as opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation. The Fish and Wildlife Service manages approximately 95 million acres of land and 760 million acres of submerged lands and waters.

- **Forest Service.** The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands for multiple uses, including timber, recreation, and watershed management and to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.
- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.** NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, ocean, and coasts; to share that knowledge and information with others; and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources. Among other outdoor recreation activities, NOAA manages the National Marine Sanctuary System, which facilitates public access and recreational opportunities across more than 600,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters. NOAA also manages recreational fishing in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, the zone that extends from 3 to 200 nautical miles off the coast of the United States.
- **National Park Service.** The Park Service manages the 84 million acres of the National Park System—including national parks, monuments, recreation areas, seashores, lakeshores, and preserves—to conserve the scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife of the system so that they remain unimpaired for the enjoyment of current and future generations.

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## Agencies' Information about Their Spending and Funding Supporting Outdoor Recreation Varies and Has Limitations

The information that the seven federal agencies we reviewed have about their spending or funding that supports outdoor recreation varies, and available information is not intended to fully or precisely reflect all agency spending or funding on recreation. Five of the seven agencies we examined—the Army Corps of Engineers, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service—identified budget lines related

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to outdoor recreation and spending or funding for those budget lines.<sup>13</sup> The Bureau of Reclamation and NOAA did not identify entire budget lines related to outdoor recreation, but in 2014, Reclamation estimated its funding for outdoor recreation for fiscal years 2012 through 2014. Agencies' spending or funding for budget lines they identified may not accurately reflect their overall support for outdoor recreation because, for example, a program can support multiple purposes, so it can be difficult to determine how to divide a program's costs among its different purposes.

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## Army Corps of Engineers

The Corps has a budget line for its recreation program, which includes spending for maintaining and managing visitor centers, infrastructure, and trails. Spending for the Corps' recreation budget line is not intended to fully and precisely reflect the agency's overall recreation spending.

Spending for the Corps' budget line may not accurately reflect the agency's overall support for outdoor recreation because programs and activities that are not included in the budget line also contribute to outdoor recreation, according to agency officials. For example, through its navigation program, the Corps manages navigation locks, which benefit both commercial and recreational travel. The agency also manages levees to reduce flood risk, and the public in some cases may use these levees as trails. Spending for the budget line may overstate spending for outdoor recreation because visitor centers, which are included in the budget line, may provide information to visitors about other Corps programs. For example, the Bradford Island Visitor Center in Oregon has exhibits about the cultural history of the region, dam construction, and development of navigation along the Columbia River.

Annual expenditures for the Corps' recreation program budget line averaged about \$292 million for fiscal years 2010 through 2019 (see table 1).

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<sup>13</sup>In addition to providing spending or funding data, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service also identified recreation fees collected or spent each year. Each agency retains the fees they collect to spend on certain activities. Specifically, the recreation fees may only be used for repair, maintenance and facility enhancement related directly to visitor enjoyment, visitor access, and health and safety; interpretation, visitor information, visitor service, visitor needs assessments, and signs; habitat restoration directly related to wildlife-dependent recreation that is limited to hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, or photography; law enforcement related to public use and recreation; direct operating or capital costs associated with the recreation fee program; fee management agreement for collection and processing of fees, emergency medical service, or law enforcement services; and visitor reservation service. 16 U.S.C. § 6807(a)(3).

**Table 1: Army Corps of Engineers Recreation Program Expenditures, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2019**

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Recreation <sup>a</sup>	324.6	314.2	319.9	287.1	264.7	267.6	272.6	276.7	298.5	293.0

Source: Army Corps of Engineers. | GAO-21-592

Note: Expenditures are reported in nominal dollars, which are not adjusted for inflation.

<sup>a</sup>Includes agency expenditures for activities such as maintaining and managing visitor centers and infrastructure, such as buildings, roads, bridges, and trails; preparing studies and surveys related to recreation; managing water for recreation; managing impacts of recreation infrastructure on threatened and endangered species, such as by consulting with the Department of the Interior, and developing biological assessments; and curating, storing, and maintaining a collection of cultural resources related to recreation.

## BLM

BLM identified two budget lines that primarily support outdoor recreation: Recreation Resources Management, which funds activities that support recreation and access to public lands, and Land Acquisition. Funding for these budget lines is not intended to fully and precisely reflect the agency’s overall recreation funding.

BLM’s funding for the two budget lines may understate its overall support for outdoor recreation because BLM activities undertaken primarily for other purposes also support outdoor recreation, according to agency officials. For example, BLM manages 28 national monuments to conserve, protect, and restore America’s natural and cultural heritage while providing for compatible uses, including recreation.<sup>14</sup> However, because recreation is not the primary purpose of these areas, BLM did not identify the budget line that funds national monuments as primarily supporting outdoor recreation.

BLM’s annual allotments for the budget lines it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$77 million for fiscal years 2010 through 2019. BLM also collected an average of about \$21 million in recreation fees each year during that time (see table 2).

<sup>14</sup>Most of the national monuments BLM manages were established pursuant to the Antiquities Act of 1906 (54 U.S.C. §§ 320301-320303), which authorizes the President to declare historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, or other objects of historic or scientific interest on lands owned or controlled by the federal government to be national monuments.

**Table 2: Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Allotments for Budget Lines That Primarily Support Outdoor Recreation and Recreation Fees Collected, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2019**

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Recreation Resources Management <sup>a</sup>	50.0	49.2	49.1	46.1	48.7	48.7	51.2	53.5	54.5	55.5
Land Acquisition <sup>b</sup>	29.7	29.7	22.3	21.2	19.5	19.8	38.6	31.4	24.9	26.5
<b>Total allotments<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>79.6</b>	<b>78.8</b>	<b>71.4</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>68.2</b>	<b>68.5</b>	<b>89.8</b>	<b>84.9</b>	<b>79.4</b>	<b>82.0</b>
Recreation fees collected <sup>d</sup>	16.6	17.4	17.1	17.9	18.6	20.7	22.0	23.3	26.2	26.8

Source: GAO analysis of BLM information. | GAO-21-592

Notes: Allotments and fees are reported in nominal dollars, which are not adjusted for inflation.

This table includes budget lines identified by BLM as primarily supporting outdoor recreation in Department of the Interior, *Report to Congress: Public Access for Hunting, Fishing, Shooting, and other Recreational Activities on Public Lands* (Washington, D.C.: October 2014).

<sup>a</sup>Includes costs associated with managing recreation activities and visitor services on BLM land and waters, such as recreation planning, visitor safety and information, and facility management and accessibility.

<sup>b</sup>Provides for the purchase of lands and waters for access for hunting, fishing, and other recreation and to consolidate public lands to preserve areas of natural, cultural, and recreational importance. According to BLM officials, the majority of land acquisitions are related to recreation. These amounts reflect rescissions of prior year balances.

<sup>c</sup>Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

<sup>d</sup>Recreation fees collected in that fiscal year. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. J, tit. VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377 (2004) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801-6814)) authorizes BLM to charge and collect recreation fees at lands and waters it manages. BLM retains the collected fees and uses them primarily for on-site improvements, such as facility maintenance, repair, and enhancement; interpretation and visitor services; and certain habitat restoration.

## Fish and Wildlife Service

The Fish and Wildlife Service identified six budget lines that primarily support outdoor recreation, including budget lines that fund visitor services, certain land acquisition, conservation, and wildlife restoration activities. Funding for these budget lines is not intended to fully and precisely reflect the agency’s overall recreation funding.

Funding for the Fish and Wildlife Service’s budget lines may not accurately reflect the agency’s overall support for outdoor recreation, according to agency officials. Specifically, funding for some budget lines the agency did not identify as primarily supporting outdoor recreation also provide some support for outdoor recreation. For example, the Fish and Wildlife Service did not include funding for fish and aquatic conservation, which is intended to enhance fish populations but which can, in turn, support recreational fishing. Conversely, in some cases, the budget lines

that Fish and Wildlife Service identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation may overstate the agency’s support for outdoor recreation because some also support other parts of the agency’s mission. For example, funding for wildlife restoration supports research activities that may benefit commercial fisheries, in addition to supporting recreational fishing.<sup>15</sup>

The Fish and Wildlife Service’s annual allotments for the budget lines it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged \$1.3 billion for fiscal years 2010 through 2019.<sup>16</sup> Fish and Wildlife Service also collected an average of \$6 million in recreation fees each year during that time frame (see table 3).

**Table 3: Fish and Wildlife Service Allotments for Budget Lines That Primarily Support Outdoor Recreation and Recreation Fees Collected, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2019**

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
National Wildlife Refuge System Visitor Services <sup>a</sup>	80.0	75.6	74.2	69.0	70.3	70.9	73.3	73.3	73.3	73.3
Land Acquisition Project <sup>b</sup>	62.8	35.4	30.1	32.2	35.1	25.1	38.4	29.9	33.8	25.1
North American Wetlands Conservation Fund <sup>c</sup>	47.6	37.4	35.5	34.1	53.2	54.8	35.1	38.1	40.0	42.0
Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Fund <sup>d</sup>	477.8	450.2	433.9	439.1	406.8	429.3	442.3	435.2	438.1	450.2
Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Fund <sup>e</sup>	500.7	411.8	397.6	534.2	789.6	577.5	725.5	792.9	829.1	723.8
Migratory Bird Conservation Account <sup>f</sup>	51.1	50.8	56.5	65.0	55.8	70.4	70.1	83.3	80.9	78.0
<b>Total allotments<sup>g</sup></b>	<b>1,220.0</b>	<b>985.6</b>	<b>1,027.9</b>	<b>1,173.5</b>	<b>1,410.8</b>	<b>1,228.0</b>	<b>1,384.9</b>	<b>1,452.8</b>	<b>1,495.2</b>	<b>1,392.5</b>

<sup>15</sup>The North American Wetlands Conservation Fund encourages partnerships among public agencies and other stakeholders to protect, restore, and manage wetland ecosystems, among other things. The Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Fund provides federal aid for managing and restoring fish associated with sport or recreational fishing, coastal wetlands, and boating infrastructure improvement, among other things.

<sup>16</sup>According to agency officials, most of the funding for these budget lines is non-appropriated funds, such as oil and gas receipts, excise taxes, and funds from the sale of Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps (Duck Stamps).

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Recreation fees collected <sup>h</sup>	4.8	5.2	5.1	5.0	5.1	5.1	5.6	6.9	7.5	7.5

Source: GAO analysis of Fish and Wildlife Service information. | GAO-21-592

Notes: Allotments and fees are reported in nominal dollars, which are not adjusted for inflation.

This table includes activities identified by Fish and Wildlife Service as primarily supporting outdoor recreation in Department of the Interior, *Report to Congress: Public Access for Hunting, Fishing, Shooting, and other Recreational Activities on Public Lands* (Washington, D.C.: October 2014).

<sup>a</sup>Provides public access and recreational opportunities on National Wildlife Refuges. The amounts shown for this budget line represent the appropriations the congressional committee reports accompanying the Department of the Interior's annual appropriations act directed to Visitor Services for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

<sup>b</sup>Invests revenues from offshore oil and gas leasing to help strengthen communities, preserve history, and protect important fish, wildlife, and plant habitats.

<sup>c</sup>Provides funds to support partnerships that protect, enhance, and restore habitat for wetland-dependent birds and other wildlife. The Fund receives appropriations as well as deposits of fines, penalties, and forfeitures for violations of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

<sup>d</sup>Provides federal aid to state fish, wildlife, and boating agencies for the management and restoration of fisheries. Certain taxes, such as excise taxes on sport fishing equipment and taxes on small engine fuel, are deposited into the Fund.

<sup>e</sup>Provides federal assistance for projects to restore, enhance, and manage wildlife resources and to conduct state hunter education programs. Excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, bows, and arrows are deposited into the Fund.

<sup>f</sup>Provides funds to acquire waterfowl habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Migratory Bird Conservation Fund receives appropriations and non-appropriated funds, such as proceeds from the sale of Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation (Duck) Stamps.

<sup>g</sup>Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

<sup>h</sup>Recreation fees collected in that fiscal year. The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. J, tit. VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377 (2004) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801-6814)) authorizes the Fish and Wildlife Service to charge and collect recreation fees on lands and waters it manages. The Fish and Wildlife Service retains the collected fees and uses them primarily to improve recreational facilities and visitor opportunities and services.

## Forest Service

The Forest Service identified two budget lines that support outdoor recreation. The Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness budget line supports activities that include managing infrastructure for recreation, such as camp sites and boat docks; protecting and providing access to heritage sites and cultural resources, such as archaeological and historical artifacts; and volunteer programs that help support visitor centers, habitat restoration, and trail access. The Trails budget line supports management and care for 158,000 miles of trails for recreational use. Spending for these budget lines is not intended to fully and precisely reflect the agency's overall recreation spending.

Spending for these two budget lines understates the Forest Service’s overall support for outdoor recreation because other budget lines also contribute to supporting outdoor recreation, according to agency officials. For example, the Forest Service’s facilities budget line includes spending for a wide variety of facilities, including campgrounds and visitor centers used for outdoor recreation.

The Forest Service’s annual expenditures for the two budget lines it identified as supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$225 million for fiscal years 2014 through 2019.<sup>17</sup> The agency also expended an average of about \$79 million in recreation fees each year during that time (see table 4).

**Table 4: Forest Service Expenditures for Budget Lines That It Identified as Supporting Outdoor Recreation and Recreation Fees Expended, Fiscal Years 2014 through 2019**

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year					
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness <sup>a</sup>	165.5	164.4	171.9	178.3	174.0	176.4
Trails <sup>b</sup>	50.9	51.5	54.7	53.0	55.4	55.1
<b>Total expenditures<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>216.4</b>	<b>215.8</b>	<b>226.6</b>	<b>231.2</b>	<b>229.4</b>	<b>231.4</b>
Recreation fees expended <sup>d</sup>	69.4	62.0	68.7	91.2	93.0	91.6

Source: Forest Service. | GAO-21-592

Note: Expenditures are reported in nominal dollars, which are not adjusted for inflation.

<sup>a</sup>Includes management of developed recreation, dispersed recreation, heritage and cultural resources, interpretation and tourism services, online recreation planning platform, and volunteer services.

<sup>b</sup>Includes management and care for trails, including National and Historic Trails.

<sup>c</sup>Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

<sup>d</sup>Recreation fees expended in that fiscal year. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. J, tit. VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377 (2004) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801-6814)) authorizes the Forest Service to charge and collect recreation fees on lands and waters it manages. The Forest Service retains the collected fees and uses them primarily for activities such as annual operation and maintenance, interpretation, signage, wildlife habitat restoration, resource preservation, and law enforcement.

## National Park Service

The Park Service identified eight budget lines that primarily support outdoor recreation, including budget lines that fund park operations,

<sup>17</sup>Forest Service officials said they transitioned to a new financial system in November 2013 and were not able to provide complete expenditure data for these budget lines before fiscal year 2014 because the data were archived and not readily available.



conservation of natural resources, and land access and development to increase access for outdoor recreation. Funding for these budget lines is not intended to fully and precisely reflect the agency’s overall recreation funding.

Funding for the budget lines the Park Service identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation may not accurately reflect its overall support for outdoor recreation, according to agency officials. Funding for these budget lines may understate support because other funding may also support outdoor recreation. For example, agency officials said that the Park Service did not include budget lines for projects that receive specific funding, which can support activities related to outdoor recreation such as trail improvement and maintenance. The agency did not include project funding because that funding can also support activities that do not support outdoor recreation, like maintaining roads such as the George Washington Memorial Parkway, according to agency officials. Conversely, funding for the budget lines the Park Service identified could overstate the agency’s support for outdoor recreation because some of the funding could also support other efforts. For example, funding for park operations supports all park units, including some units that may not provide outdoor recreational opportunities.

The Park Service’s annual allotments for the budget lines it identified as primarily supporting outdoor recreation averaged about \$1.5 billion for fiscal years 2010 through 2019. The agency also collected an average of \$248 million in recreation fees each year during that time (see table 5).

**Table 5: National Park Service Allotments for Budget Lines That Primarily Support Outdoor Recreation and Recreation Fees Collected, Fiscal Years 2010 through 2019**

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Operation of National Park Service – Park Base <sup>a</sup>	1,441.6	1,409.7	1,385.3	1,233.4	1,349.5	1,365.4	1,404.4	1,412.6	1,433.3	1,429.3
Federal Lands to Parks <sup>b</sup>	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance <sup>c</sup>	8.9	8.8	9.9	9.4	9.9	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Trails <sup>d</sup>	0.0	0.5	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0

Dollars in millions

Budget line	Fiscal year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Heritage Partnership Programs <sup>e</sup>	17.8	17.4	17.4	16.5	18.3	20.3	19.8	19.8	20.3	20.3
Federal Land Acquisition <sup>f</sup>	59.8	32.8	30.5	28.9	22.1	23.5	35.1	23.5	28.4	15.9
State Conservation Assistance Grants <sup>g</sup>	37.2	37.1	42.1	39.9	45.0	45.0	106.8	106.0	120.0	120.0
Land Acquisition and State Assistance – Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) <sup>h</sup>	0.9	0.3	0.1	0.1	1.4	0.8	0.9	0.3	61.6	69.5
<b>Total allotments<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>1,566.7</b>	<b>1,507.2</b>	<b>1,487.9</b>	<b>1,330.6</b>	<b>1,448.8</b>	<b>1,467.6</b>	<b>1,578.9</b>	<b>1,574.9</b>	<b>1,676.2</b>	<b>1,667.6</b>
Recreation fees collected <sup>j</sup>	174.8	187.5	195.3	194.7	202.8	253.8	290.7	315.4	327.8	333.4

Source: National Park Service. | GAO-21-592

Notes: Allotments and fees are reported in nominal dollars, which are not adjusted for inflation.

This table includes activities identified by the National Park Service as primarily supporting outdoor recreation in Department of the Interior, *Report to Congress: Public Access for Hunting, Fishing, Shooting, and other Recreational Activities on Public Lands* (Washington, D.C.: October 2014).

<sup>a</sup>Includes operational expenses of the National Park System and other field units, such as the National Trails System, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and wilderness areas. It does not include project funding, funding for central and regional offices, or funding for service-wide program and support offices.

<sup>b</sup>Conserves natural and cultural resources and supports a nationwide system of parks, open space, rivers, and trails to provide recreation and conservation benefits through the transfer of surplus federal lands.

<sup>c</sup>Provides technical assistance and support to communities to create local conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities.

<sup>d</sup>Sustains the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network and provides technical and financial assistance to state, community, tribal, and nongovernmental organizations in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed to increase access and improve recreational activities.

<sup>e</sup>Supports conservation and stewardship of natural and cultural resources and educational and recreational benefits by preserving cultural and natural resources and providing heritage education.

<sup>f</sup>Provides for the acquisition of land and interests in land to preserve and protect, for public use and enjoyment, the historic, scenic, natural, and recreational values of the National Park System.

<sup>g</sup>Provides matching grants to states and local units of government for the acquisition and development of land and facilities to provide the public with access to new opportunities to engage in outdoor recreation.

<sup>h</sup>Allotment for the Land and Water Conservation Fund to preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation resources. The GOMESA funding is revenue from certain oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico. This budget line was not included in the 2014 Department of the Interior report. According to agency officials, GOMESA amounts were not material at that time, as they were typically far less than \$1 million annually until fiscal year 2018. Inclusion of the GOMESA funding as funding that supports outdoor recreation is consistent with the purpose of the budget line.

<sup>i</sup>Numbers may not add up due to rounding.

<sup>j</sup>Recreation fees collected in that fiscal year. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. J, tit. VIII, 118 Stat. 2809, 3377 (2004) (*codified as amended at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801-

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6814)) authorizes the National Park Service to charge and collect recreation fees on lands and waters it manages. The National Park Service retains the collected fees and uses them to repair, maintain, and enhance facilities; provide interpretation, information, and other visitor services; restore habitat for wildlife-dependent recreation; and provide law enforcement related to public use and recreation.

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## Bureau of Reclamation

Reclamation officials did not identify any budget lines that primarily support outdoor recreation, but in a 2014 report, Reclamation estimated that its funding that supported outdoor recreation totaled \$50 million each year for fiscal years 2012 through 2014.<sup>18</sup> However, this estimate may not accurately reflect Reclamation's overall funding for outdoor recreation. For its 2014 estimate, Reclamation estimated funding that went toward staff and operations and maintenance that supported outdoor recreation. The report noted that the estimate was approximate because most Reclamation staff positions are multidisciplinary natural resource positions and are not solely assigned to recreation. Some staff may primarily work on recreation activities but also spend some time on other activities such as preserving and protecting cultural resources, including archaeological sites, historic buildings, museum property, and Native American human remains and cultural items.

Reclamation has not estimated its outdoor recreation funding since 2014, and agency officials said that because the agency does not have entire budget lines that primarily support outdoor recreation, it would be difficult to do so. According to agency officials, staff in field offices would have to use professional judgement to estimate the proportion of relevant budget lines that supported recreation. Moreover, if these staff had not been in their jobs in the field offices for the entire period of the data request, it could be difficult to pull consistent information for all of the years, the officials said.

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## NOAA

NOAA officials said that the agency does not have a budget line specifically for outdoor recreation and said that the agency has not previously estimated its spending or funding for outdoor recreation. NOAA officials said the agency does not have a program exclusively related to outdoor recreation but that a number of its programs provide opportunities for, or otherwise support, recreation. For example, NOAA manages the National Marine Sanctuary System, which facilitates public access and recreational opportunities such as diving, snorkeling, and whale watching. NOAA also provides policy direction and undertakes scientific research

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<sup>18</sup>Department of the Interior, *Report to Congress: Public Access for Hunting, Fishing, Shooting, and other Recreational Activities on Public Lands*. These figures are reported in nominal terms, not adjusted for inflation.

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that it and state regulatory agencies use to ensure sustainable management of U.S. fisheries, including those that support recreational fishing.

NOAA officials said that it would be difficult for them to isolate funding that supports outdoor recreation because the agency allocates some of its funding by site rather than by activity, and staff at a site may work on multiple activities. Moreover, many of NOAA's activities support multiple purposes. For example, NOAA's Office of Marine National Sanctuaries supports a variety of activities, such as education, outdoor recreation, and resource protection, at each sanctuary site. The agency's financial management system tracks the majority of this office's funding by site, and within the current system, it would be difficult to track funding by site and by activity, according to agency officials. In addition, NOAA's activities that support multiple purposes include fish stock assessments, which support management of both recreational and commercial fisheries, according to agency officials.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, and Interior for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix I, the Army Corps of Engineers, on behalf of Defense, thanked us and provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service, on behalf of Interior, provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. NOAA, on behalf of Commerce, also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of the Interior. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

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If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or [andersonN@gao.gov](mailto:andersonN@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nathan Anderson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "N".

Nathan Anderson  
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives

The Honorable David Joyce  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives

# Appendix I: Comments from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS  
441 G STREET, NW  
WASHINGTON, DC 20314-1000

JUN 28, 2021

Mr. Nathan Anderson  
Director, Natural Resources and Environment  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Anderson:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-21-592, 'FEDERAL LAND: Information on Agency Spending for Outdoor Recreation is Limited,' dated June 7, 2021 (GAO Code 104288).

The USACE is grateful for the professional courtesy extended by the GAO staff during this project. The GAO team's interactions bring great credit to your Natural Resources and Environment mission team. USACE considers GAO's flexibility and communication during this project as best practices for external auditors working with USACE. Technical feedback was provided separately on draft report.

My point of contact is the USACE External Audit Liaison Officer, HQ-CEIR@usace.army.mil, (202) 761-8518.

Sincerely,

KRAUSEJEFFREY.F.1229014710  
Y.F.1229014710

Digitally signed by  
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Date: 2021.06.28 13:07:09  
-04'00'

Jeffrey F. Krause  
Chief Natural Resource Management  
Branch  
Directorate of Civil Works  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Nathan Anderson, (202) 512-3841 or [andersonN@gao.gov](mailto:andersonN@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Anne-Marie Fennell (Director), Jonathan Dent (Assistant Director), Marya Link (Analyst in Charge), Karen Chen, Bethany Benitez, Mark Braza, Tara Congdon, and Jeanette Soares made key contributions to this report.



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