



**Testimony to the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development  
Kelly Ault, Executive Director, Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance  
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**Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative Community Grants and recreational infrastructure investments**

Thank you for having me today to represent the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance (VOBA) in expressing support for the Governor's recreation investment proposals.

VOBA is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening, expanding, attracting, and retaining outdoor recreation economy businesses. VOBA's mission is to educate Vermonters about outdoor recreation and support business development in the areas of financing, workforce, infrastructure, and branding.

Our members includes 75 sector businesses that produce, provide, and sell outdoor products, services, and experiences. VOBA stemmed from VOREC's early statewide discussions about increasing business opportunities. As a business network, we work collaboratively with VOREC on shared goals.

As outdoor sector businesses, we support the economic recovery strategy of investing \$5 million to expand the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Community Grant program, \$5 million to improve access to state lands and trail networks, as well as funding for additional construction and maintenance.

We believe these investments will shore up infrastructure in communities across the state contributing to healthy lands and waters, active communities, engaged employees, valued companies, and lead to the long-term stability of Vermont's economy.

**Commerce:** We already know that outdoor recreation has been a long time driver of Vermont's economy.

- Data from the US Bureau of Economic Analysis shows that prior to the pandemic (between 2012 - 2017,) the sector was growing faster (+15%) than the overall Vermont economy (+3%.)
- Data from 2019 reports that outdoor recreation contributed 5.2% (\$1.8 billion) to Vermont's state GDP, the second highest in the nation, connected to 20,000 jobs. Snow activities, in particular, were only behind CO & UT as the highest contributor at \$287 million.

These highly diversified businesses include:

- Global manufacturing leaders (like Burton, Darn Tough and Orvis), specialty retailers (like Onion River Outdoors in Montpelier and The Great Outdoors in Newport), recreation facilities (from ski resorts to Nordic centers), as well as firms in media, sales, and distribution.
- They involve outdoor-reliant companies in hospitality and travel, construction, education and govt.
- Outdoor recreation benefits a wide swath of employers in tech, health care, real estate, and professional services that are attracting talent, relocating their business, or offering remote workplaces based on quality of life.

**Pandemic Impacts:** We've seen outdoor recreation support our neighbors during the pandemic. Participation has soared from people seeking out the mental and physical health benefits of the outdoors.

- The Green Mountain Club reported that the average daily use count on the Long Trail was up 35% last season and overnight shelter use up 80%. A 31% increase in visitors was reported by the Stowe Trails Partnership.

Participation has buoyed local retailers and manufacturers who have benefitted from equipment sales.

- Others are on more solid footing in 2021 due to being open during seasonal cycles and located near recreation areas, as well as due to economic relief, such as financial assistance and PPP, or by bolstering e-commerce.
- However, a lot of hardship and uncertainty remains for others more reliant on visitors and groups, such as recreation event directors, guiding operations, accommodates – even small apparel and footwear brands are struggling.

**Infrastructure Investments:** Because commerce, participation, and infrastructure are interlinked, the proposed investments would be critical springboards for our state's emerging outdoor hubs.

VOBA and VOREC profiled the nine communities that received VOREC community grants through a winter activity and business guide in Vermont Sports Magazine. The VOREC grants had allowed for new linkages between recreation places and local businesses in downtowns and villages, allowing promotion as outdoor recreation destinations.

- The guide promoted 115 businesses and led to thousands of dollars of direct economic activity.
- Distribution of 19,000 copies in 7 states and 30,000 views online keeps Vermont top of mind for when travel is allowed once again.

With a significant expansion of VOREC grants in FY22, more communities can act on their vision as an outdoor recreation – friendly” destination.

The quality of life that access to the outdoors affords grounds existing businesses, attracts relocating entrepreneurs to establish new businesses and offer remote workplaces. It draws outdoor enthusiasts looking to work and play, as talent for high quality jobs and careers.

The other proposed projects would expand Vermont's outdoor recreation assets and trail networks on public and private land in ways that are sustainable, improve services, and expand participation by diverse communities.

- Local, small businesses will be contracted for construction, furthering our economic recovery.
- Non-profit organizations will be funding to manage recreation assets and build capacity to execute their responsibilities in managing private-public partnerships and landowner relationships fundamental to accessing many of Vermont's outdoor places.

**Conclusion:** These investments can help Vermont to land on the other side of the pandemic with the values that we cherish: healthy lands and waters, thriving communities, a strengthened Vermont brand and diversified economy, and resilient and healthy people, all of which will benefit Vermonters for years to come.

Thank you for your consideration of these critical recreation investments. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.