



February 1, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the House Committee on Environment and Energy today. I always appreciate the willingness of the Vermont legislature to hear from residents, businesses and advocates, particularly on topics surrounding outdoor recreation and Vermont's natural infrastructure.

My name is Drew Simmons. I live in the Mad River Valley, and am the founder of Pale Morning Media, a public relations and strategic communications consulting firm that specializes in support of outdoor recreation businesses and organizations around the country. Over the last two decades, I've worked with many of the country's leading gear and apparel makers in a variety of categories: hiking and camping, fishing and hunting, skiing and mountain biking. I've also worked to support organizations such as Grassroots Outdoor Alliance, a national coalition of more than 100 independent specialty retailers such as Outdoor Gear Exchange.

For the last 10 years or so, I've also spent an increasing amount of time advocating for the support and enhancement of the outdoor recreation economy in Vermont, which has led me to a variety of roles in the sector.

In 2017, I was named by Gov. Scott to the founding steering committee of Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC), which is likely best known for the VOREC Community Grant Program, a widely popular initiative which last year invested more than \$5 million in community recreation projects after 104 unique applications came requesting a total of \$21.5 million. That program has steadily grown in popularity because of one key reason – it embraces the full range of outdoor recreation opportunities, and puts the control of those decisions in the hands of local communities.

In 2018, I joined together with a dozen outdoor recreation businesses to create the Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance (VOBA), an organization dedicated to strengthening, expanding, attracting, and retaining outdoor recreation economy businesses in Vermont. I currently serve as chair of VOBA, and the organization now counts more than 100 members ranging from global businesses like Orvis, Burton and Darn Tough, to essential statewide businesses such as Outdoor Gear Exchange, Onion River Outdoors and Trapp Family Lodge.

I'm here today to express my support for the long-term goals of "30x30", as was first envisioned in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2017; subsequently spotlighted in the 2021 report to the National Climate Task Force ("Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful"); and as currently before us in a Vermont bill being provided to the committee.



While I generally support the long-term goals of 30x30, I'm also a significant advocate for the surrounding conversations that will take place during this process about the long-term vision for Vermont's natural landscape – which I believe is timely and essential for both the outdoor recreation economy as well as the Vermont economy as a whole.

As a quick refresher, outdoor recreation in Vermont is a significant economic driver. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, which measures the size of the outdoor recreation sector as a portion of the GDP, Vermont consumer spending accounted for \$1.53 billion in outdoor recreation spending in 2021, which made up 4.1% of Vermont's state GDP. That significant portion of GDP is the 3rd highest in the country, behind only Hawaii and Montana. The leading economic drivers for Vermont's outdoor recreation economy are currently skiing, snowboarding and other snow activities (\$215 million); as well as "conventional activities" (defined by BEA as traditional outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, boating, and hunting) which as a group accounted for \$593 million in consumer economic impact.

None of this is a secret of course. As a state, we've all seen the overwhelming popularity of our natural infrastructure since the start of the pandemic, which has driven year round traffic at trailheads, boat ramps, and ski areas. In that same time period, the state has seen record breaking numbers of more than 1 million visitors each year at state parks.

And as we all know, not all of the plates in the parking lot have been green, as out-of-state tourism, in-migration of remote workers, and record setting real estate sales have closely followed the outdoor wave. Natural areas and outdoor recreation infrastructure have become the same type of magnet for real estate values as coastlines have, attracting people who value and desire access to wild and natural places.

Yet while access to the natural world enhances the value of real estate and draws both workers and homeowners to the state of Vermont, it's even more integral to the essence of the outdoor recreation economy, as this sector specifically relies on the durable protection of healthy lands and waters for its livelihood. This ongoing protection of all those places that enable all these various types of recreational opportunities is often referred to as the "golden goose" that keeps the outdoor economy running.

It's important to note that these durable protections come in a huge variety of sizes and shapes – national parks, blue sky wilderness areas, protected rivers with blue ribbon fisheries, historic backpacking trails, creative mountain bike networks, and urban parks and greenways that bring a bit of the natural world closer to our population areas. This multi-faceted approach to conservation is part of



the pragmatic and collaborative DNA of the outdoor recreation economy both in Vermont and nationwide.

Considering all this, from the outdoor recreation business perspective, there's a lot to like in the coming Vermont conversation around 30x30.

Number one – at its core – this process is following the science. As much as I'm a true believer in the outdoor recreation economy and its ability to deliver a wide variety of positive outcomes – public health outcomes, great jobs and careers, attraction of a vibrant workforce, support of Vermont's natural environment – it's all secondary to the issues of an extinction crisis and the impact of plummeting biodiversity on our own ability to live in this place. I don't want to be the guy explaining to my grandkids about what it used to be like to have moose and brook trout around.

Number two, the 30x30 process will provide the stage for a welcome strategic conversation about natural infrastructure in Vermont. As my mom used to say, "they're not making any more dirt." And she was right. Vermont has a naturally limited space to achieve a lot of varied goals. We have a sizable forest industry, we have a population that needs places to live, we have a broad call for more conservation, and we have a population that craves natural places for outdoor recreation.

And number three – which once again, I have to stress is below the very important number 1 and number 2 – is that the process around 30x30 has a very real opportunity to provide some meaningful opportunities to increase outdoor recreation's economic impact in all parts of the state. To actually achieve the very big target number of 30%, it's going to require a big-picture holistic strategy that has some flexibility, and embraces what they call "imperfect protections" – which is the term for protected areas that have conservation as possibly a primary or even secondary benefit. It's like the old phrase about not letting perfect be the enemy of good, and this type of thought process would welcome conversations about the inclusion of non-traditional conservation targets in the 30x30 goals. Those places could include recreation areas, parks and greenways, and well-planned recreational trails that steer users away from sensitive species and habitat and discourage high-impact user created trails. This approach would also appeal to a huge range of stakeholders such as hunting and fishing, or any number of outdoor recreationists that crave improved access to nature, parks, and green infrastructure.

As a final thought, I'd like to highlight the role that a long-term visioning process for conservation, outdoor recreation, and other economic interests can play as the state navigates the coming challenges of climate change. While the bad news is that winters are getting shorter and more unpredictable – and that our future weather pattern is tied to a \$215 million chunk of the annual Vermont economy – the good news is that there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad gear, and Vermont's natural landscape



clearly has the ability to provide a wide variety of outdoor recreation options in all seasons, and all parts of the state, if we give it the chance.

The outdoor recreation economy has the ability to support tax revenue, healthier residents, gear and apparel companies, main street businesses, as well as to attract a vibrant workforce and stimulate broad-based tourism.

But outdoor recreation is a team sport, and for our state to bridge the gap from climate history to climate reality, we need to acknowledge the science, embrace the process, and welcome the opportunity that the coming conversations on 30x 30 will provide.

Respectfully,

Drew Simmons

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Chair, Vermont Outdoor Business Alliance

Founding Steering Committee Member, Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative

Attachments

US Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account (ORSA) for Vermont 2021

VOREC Grant Program, Map of Application Requests

VOBA Press Release: Vermont's Outdoor Economy