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February 21, 2024

To Senator Murkowski, Senator Sullivan, and Representative Peltola,

On behalf of the 600 members of the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), we urge you to support HR 6492 The EXPLORE Act, and any companion bill in the Senate, a bill which encompasses many policy issues important to the tourism and outdoor recreation industries.

ATIA's member businesses have expressed challenges with public land gateway communities, including a shortage of available housing, and with the outfitter permitting process. The EXPLORE Act addresses these two issues along with many others.

Recent US Bureau of Economic Analysis reporting shows the growing impact of recreation on public lands. Alaska's outdoor recreation economic impact represents 4% of Alaska's GDP, reflecting usage and spending from both residents and visitors to the state. Our own research shows the popularity of public lands for travelers coming to Alaska, with Denali National Park and Juneau's Mendenhall Glacier vying for the most popular destinations annually.

Regarding the language in the bill itself, one suggestion we have is to include tourism industry leadership voices on the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation identified on page 11, section 113.

Additionally, we recommend page 166, section 312, be enhanced to encourage consistency in permitting administration, group sizes, cost considerations, and other details among federal land management agencies. Currently, there are a wide range of practices among federal agencies managing very similar lands. Many tourism operators work with multiple federal jurisdictions to provide a single visitor vacation experience which makes permitting efforts unnecessarily complicated and cumbersome. Additionally, permit considerations could be reviewed and unified, when the resource allows, with an eye towards aligning permitting requirements with reasonable standards already being used by tour operators. For example, permitted group sizes could be coordinated with the capacity of 15 passenger vans which many operators efficiently use rather than mandating the arbitrary and more common 10 or 12 person group size including guides. Operators have been asking for considerations for many years and the EXPLORE Act provides a stellar opportunity for coordinated improvements.

One concern we have is with page 114, section 156, which addresses funding availability for recreation projects from the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP). The ORLP stipulates eligible fund recipients meet population size and poverty rate parameters that only the two largest municipalities in Alaska qualify for. We encourage the bill to expand funding opportunities through the Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) also.

Housing will require a multi-faceted approach to address low inventory and high costs, especially in rural communities. The EXPLORE Act includes a provision which will ease housing challenges in gateway communities to both National Park Service and US Forest Service lands, of which Alaska has many qualifying towns.

We urge you to support this proposed bipartisan solution to a litany of public land-related issues. Please reach out if ATIA can answer any questions or provide additional information.

Sincerely,

Jillian Simpson  
President & CEO

Craig Jennison  
ATIA Board Chair