



POLICY BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

Expanding Access to Public Lands for Americans with Disabilities

Prepared For

Members of Congress, Congressional Staff,
Department of the Interior, Department of
Agriculture, Department of Justice, Office of
Management and Budget, Council on
Environmental Quality, and Executive
Branch Policymakers, Paralyzed Veterans
of America, American Association of
Retired Persons, American Association of
People with Disabilities

Prepared By

UPLA

Issue Area

Public Lands Access • Disability Access •
Outdoor Recreation • Multiple Use

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has made significant progress in improving accessibility in parks, buildings, trails, and recreation facilities. However, millions of Americans remain unable to access large portions of federal public lands because of mobility limitations, age-related impairments, injuries, or disabilities.

At the same time, federal travel management policies have reduced motorized access across many public lands, limiting opportunities for disabled Americans to experience hunting, camping, sightseeing, wildlife viewing, and outdoor recreation.

The Outdoor Americans with Disabilities Act represents an important step toward improving accessibility on federal lands. UPLA supports full implementation of the Act and encourages policymakers to recognize that responsible motorized access is often one of the most effective accessibility tools available.

THE PROBLEM

Public Lands Are Not Equally Accessible.

Many Americans cannot hike long distances, traverse rough terrain, carry camping equipment, access remote viewpoints, reach hunting areas, or visit cultural and historic sites without some form of motorized transportation.

While accessible parking lots and paved pathways provide important accommodations, they do not address accessibility across the broader landscape of federal public lands.

WHY IT MATTERS

America Is Aging: Millions of Americans over age 60 continue to enjoy camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, photography, and scenic touring. As mobility decreases, motorized access becomes increasingly important.

Disabled Veterans: Many disabled veterans rely upon motorized transportation to access public lands for recreation, healing, social connection, physical activity, and family engagement.

Mobility Impairments Extend Beyond Wheelchairs: Heart disease, respiratory conditions, arthritis, joint replacements, neurological disorders, and balance impairments often limit access even when individuals do not qualify for specialized permits.

Access Closures Have Disproportionate Effects: Healthy users may hike farther, while mobility-impaired users often lose access entirely.

HUMAN IMPACT

For many Americans, motorized access is not a convenience—it is the only practical means of experiencing public lands.

A disabled veteran seeking access to hunting areas, a retiree with joint replacements hoping to visit a scenic overlook, or an individual with a respiratory condition attempting to enjoy dispersed camping may be unable to access these opportunities if routes are closed.

Public land policies should recognize that accessibility often depends upon maintaining reasonable transportation access and preserving routes that provide access to recreation destinations.

PUBLIC LAND EQUITY

Federal public lands belong to all Americans.

Access policies should not unintentionally favor only those physically capable of hiking long distances, carrying heavy equipment, or traversing difficult terrain.

Reasonable motorized access helps ensure that public lands remain accessible to Americans of all ages and abilities.

OUTDOOR AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

A Positive Step Forward: UPLA supports implementation of the Outdoor Americans with Disabilities Act because it seeks to improve opportunities for Americans with disabilities to enjoy public lands.

Accessibility Must Include Access: Accessibility should include access to recreation destinations, scenic viewpoints, dispersed camping, hunting opportunities, and meaningful public land experiences.

UPLA POSITION

Expand Access, Protect Existing Opportunities, and Improve Planning by requiring agencies to analyze disability access impacts, preserve accessible travel routes, and consider aging populations during route designation decisions.

REQUESTED ACTIONS

Congress: Fully implement the Outdoor Americans with Disabilities Act; require disability impact analyses during travel planning; promote accessible recreation opportunities; and require agencies to evaluate accessibility impacts before closing routes.

Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture: Inventory routes providing critical accessibility benefits; incorporate accessibility into travel management decisions; preserve routes serving disabled and aging users.

Executive Branch: Prioritize outdoor accessibility initiatives and integrate accessibility considerations into travel management and recreation planning.

APPENDIX – CASE STUDIES AND IMPACTS-Further documentation available upon request

- Outdoor Americans with Disabilities Act
- Disabled Veteran Recreation Access
- Aging Americans and Public Lands Access
- Motorized Access as an Accessibility Tool
- Hunting Access for Mobility-Impaired Users
- Scenic Touring Opportunities
- Dispersed Camping Accessibility
- Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument
- Bears Ears National Monument
- San Rafael Swell Travel Management Plan
- Henry Mountains / Fremont Gorge Travel Management Plan
- Accessibility Impacts of Route Closures
- State Disability Permit Programs
- Federal Accessibility Requirements and Public Lands

CONTACT

Loren Campbell

President

Email: president@utahpla.com

Phone: 909-499-3295

Website: www.UtahPLA.com

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