

Good afternoon, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Jonathan Godes and I am the President of the Colorado Association of Ski Towns, representing 41 municipalities and counties that are largely dependent on tourism and the ski industry. I am also the former Mayor and a current City Councilor of Glenwood Springs Colorado. I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to be here today to share the association's robust support for the Forest Service Flexible Housing Partnerships Act.

Colorado's mountain communities, such as Steamboat Springs, Vail, Breckenridge, and my community of Glenwood Springs, have long been known for their natural beauty, unparalleled outdoor recreational opportunities, and vibrant tourism industry. A decades-long housing crisis threatens all sectors of our economy and workforce, including seasonal and permanent employees of the United States Forest Service.

Many essential workers, including outdoor recreation industry professionals, healthcare workers, teachers, firefighters, and service industry employees, struggle to find housing. This forces large proportions of our workforces to far-flung bedroom communities up to 60 miles away, requiring long daily commutes over high mountain passes, often during major snowstorms, resulting in increased traffic congestion, decreased quality of life, and a diminished sense of community. Businesses of all sizes and sectors struggle to fill long lists of open positions, and high turnover depletes public- and private-sector organizations of critical talent, as employees relocate elsewhere in search of an affordable place to raise their families.

Our housing crisis is driven in part by a lack of private land available for residential development. Federal lands make up more than 80% of our region's land mass. Forest Service parcels located in or adjacent to town centers have the potential to serve as incredibly valuable redevelopment opportunities in our mountain communities. The reauthorization of the enhanced leasing authority in the Farm Bill would allow for continued partnerships among local governments, private industry, and the Forest Service as we work together on very complicated but much-needed workforce housing projects.

For example, Steamboat Springs, Routt County and the Routt National Forest are exploring residential development options for a vacant administrative parcel that could be home to 100 units of affordable housing. The Town of Dillon and Summit County, Colorado, are making progress on the redevelopment of an underutilized and dilapidated work center into a 163-unit housing project. In Eagle County, there is the potential to build an additional 300 affordable housing units over six parcels. Projects like these are critical to our ability to address the severe labor shortages that threaten the profitability of our small businesses and large ski industry partners alike. They would furthermore provide sorely needed housing options for the U.S. Forest Service, where unfilled positions hinder important work related to wildfire mitigation, natural resource protection, and the administration of recreational permits by private businesses.

For CAST member communities to pursue affordable housing projects under this Act in partnership with the USFS, two elements are of particular importance:

1. A 100-year lease term. Given the extremely high cost of development in resort communities, this timeframe on the lease term is necessary to secure the financing required by developers.
2. Allow credit for off-site accommodation of U. S. Forest Service needs. As an example, for a USFS site in Aspen, construction of a warehouse, workshop, visitor center, and administrative office would be incompatible within a residential neighborhood. These needs could be better met on separate land owned by project partners. By receiving credit for making these improvements for the Forest Service through a mutual lease, the partners would have greater flexibility to develop multiple parcels in the most efficient and effective ways. We request that local communities be granted the ability to bring non-federal lands to the table, and that credit for U.S. Forest Service use of those lands be included in the calculation of local community contributions.

The Forest Service manages dozens of administrative sites in Colorado that are vacant, underutilized, neglected, and in need of significant improvements for the purpose of employee housing. By pursuing this renewed leasing authority, we hope to better utilize federal lands to address a crisis that hobbles public- and private-sector employers throughout the region. We respectfully request this subcommittee's support of the Forest Service Flexible Housing Partnerships Act of 2023.