

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE RESOURCES STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 25, 2022

1:06 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Josiah Patkotak, Chair  
Representative Grier Hopkins, Vice Chair  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Calvin Schrage  
Representative Sara Hannan

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative George Rauscher  
Representative Mike Cronk  
Representative Ronald Gillham  
Representative Tom McKay

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 4

Urging the Governor to establish the Office of Outdoor Equity.

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HCR 4

SHORT TITLE: URGING EST. OF OFFICE OF OUTDOOR EQUITY

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) TARR

04/16/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/16/21	(H)	RES
02/25/22	(H)	RES AT 1:00 PM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, introduced HCR 4 by providing a PowerPoint presentation titled "HCR 4: Urging the Governor to Establish the Office of Outdoor Equity."

REPRESENTATIVE ANGELICA RUBIO

New Mexico State Legislature  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HCR 4.

LEE HART, Executive Director  
Alaska Outdoor Alliance  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HCR 4.

DIANA RHOADES, Director of Community Engagement  
Anchorage Park Foundation  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HCR 4.

RYAN O'SHAUGHNESSY, Executive Director  
Trail Mix, Inc.  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HCR 4.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

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**CHAIR JOSIAH PATKOTAK** called the House Resources Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:06 p.m. Representatives Fields, Hopkins, Hannan, Schrage, and Patkotak were present at the call to order.

#### **HCR 4-URGING EST. OF OFFICE OF OUTDOOR EQUITY**

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CHAIR PATKOTAK announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 4, Urging the Governor to establish the Office of Outdoor Equity.

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REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HCR 4 by providing a PowerPoint presentation titled "HCR 4: Urging the Governor to Establish the Office of Outdoor Equity.". She explained that HCR 4 is a concurrent resolution because it is the legislature speaking to the governor. She displayed the second slide, "Alaskans Love the Outdoors!" She noted that 81 percent of Alaska residents participate in outdoor recreation each year. During the COVID pandemic in 2020, she continued, Alaskans had the opportunity to

get outside, which was critical to their mental health and wellness. According to the Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development, she related, spending time outdoors leads to reduced stress, improved concentration, and promotes overall wellbeing. However, she pointed out, access historically has not been universal, which is why this resolution is being brought forth. Representative Tarr moved to the third slide, "Why HCR 4?" She said every Alaskan should be able to hunt, fish, hike, camp, watch wildlife, find solitude, and enjoy Alaska's special places.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR spoke to the fourth slide, "What does HCR 4 call for?" She explained that HCR 4 calls for the governor to establish an Office of Outdoor Equity within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The resolution also requests that, through this office, the governor make available grants to organizations in Alaska that are working to improve access to the state's outdoor resources, especially in communities that have historically been excluded from outdoor recreation and subsistence activities. Rather than this being entirely state funded, the vision is that there be public-private partnerships because such collaboration will increase access. According to federal government tracking, the outdoor recreation industry is a \$2.2 billion industry in Alaska, which suggests that there is opportunity for public-private partnerships.

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REPRESENTATIVE TARR addressed the fifth slide, "Exposure to outdoors lasts a lifetime." She said research shows that children exposed to the outdoors are much more likely to take that experience into adulthood. She turned to the sixth slide, "Are young people getting involved?" and noted that the purchase of hunting equipment provides funding to conservation programs through surcharges. If there are fewer participants, she continued, it could potentially compromise the future existence of those programs. For the age group of 25-34 years, she related, 2018 was a peak year at 17 million hunters, whereas the number dropped to 11.5 million hunters in 2016. During this same period a similar reduction occurred in the age group of 18-24 years. Research has found that this is often due to lack of access, not lack of interest, and this is what HCR 4 speaks to.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR displayed the seventh slide, "What are barriers to getting outside?" According to research, she said, barriers include cost, transportation, experience, lack of gear, safety, and historical exclusion. For example, she related, as

an outdoor guide in Alaska she has led groups for women, many of whom did not have outdoor experience growing up and were uncomfortable outdoors. [An example] of an access barrier, she noted, is the increase in rental rates for state-owned cabins.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR moved to the eighth and ninth slides, "What are other states doing?" She pointed out that 18 states have created offices of outdoor recreation or task forces and this equity piece is now being brought into it. This year, at least 69 pieces of legislation [in 30 states] are being considered that would create offices of outdoor recreation or education or equity to help meet the need for removing barriers to access through public-private partnerships. She noted that HCR 4 also speaks to indigenous place names, which can be woven into the work for educational opportunities.

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REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS agreed this is something Alaska needs. He noted that HCR 4 looks at racial and social disparities and asked why support for disability access to the outdoors is not included. He further asked whether other states have included disability access.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR replied that that is an oversight and said it should be a part of the consideration.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS stated he may look at a "tweak" to that.

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CHAIR PATKOTAK [opened invited testimony].

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REPRESENTATIVE ANGELICA RUBIO, New Mexico State Legislature, testified in support of HCR 4. She said she is thankful to be a part of the conversation around New Mexico's Outdoor Equity Fund, which was established in 2019 alongside the creation of the Division of Outdoor Recreation. She is a testament to how transformative the outdoors can be physically and mentally, she related. New Mexico ranks relatively low on issues like child poverty and quality of life and many of the state's youth are struggling. The Outdoor Equity Fund is a tool to help address the systemic issues that are facing many of New Mexico's young people.

REPRESENTATIVE RUBIO recounted that during summer 2018 there was discussion about diversifying New Mexico's economy, with tourism and outdoor recreation given prioritization. Many people saw tourism and outdoor recreation as an opportunity to become economic drivers in Native rural economies. They wanted outdoor recreation to be rooted in the philosophy of diversity, inclusion, and equity to create a new generation of land stewards; an investment in youth who should have an opportunity to experience the state's beautiful outdoors. These principles lead to New Mexico's governor supporting and signing the legislation in 2019 that created a Division of Outdoor Recreation that centered on equity. These principles also led to partnering with several organizations to advocate for the creation of the Outdoor Equity Fund, which New Mexico's state legislature approved in 2019. A recurring commitment was made to provide grants to towns, cities, tribal and Native communities, and nonprofits for the purpose of providing opportunities for low-income young people to spend time outside. Private and corporate entities are allowed to donate to the fund to help expand its reach all over New Mexico.

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REPRESENTATIVE RUBIO stated that the 2020 inaugural year of the Outdoor Equity Fund was successful despite COVID-19. A total of \$261,863 was awarded to 25 programs that got approximately 2,700 kids outside. In 2021, she continued, \$890,337 was awarded to 57 programs throughout the state that got nearly 22,000 youth outside. Private sponsors were a part of that process, investing alongside the State of New Mexico in this very innovative grant. Ninety organizations applied to the fund in 2021, with a total funding request of \$1.2 million. The 2022 cycle will be opened with \$3 million in funding, three times more than the previous year.

REPRESENTATIVE RUBIO related that a program in her community is provided by Family Youth, Inc., a group known for working with young people who have been dealt hard times. This program, the Outdoor Legacy Project, provides resources and support to educate youth on conservation, climate, and cultural connectedness to the outdoors. The project empowers youth with innovative, quality outdoor experiences that promote a sense of ownership, relationship, and responsibility regarding the land and natural resources. There are many stories about how many young people have been completely transformed. She offered her belief that being outdoors is what young people truly need. She

congratulated the committee on urging Alaska's governor to create an Office of Outdoor Equity.

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LEE HART, Executive Director, Alaska Outdoor Alliance, testified in support of HCR 4. She stated that one of the top priorities of the outdoor recreation industry is equity and inclusivity, and the Alaska Outdoor Alliance is dedicated to ensuring Alaska enjoys the best outdoor recreation academy in the world. The alliance is also a founding member of the State Outdoor Business Alliance Network, which now includes people in 26 states doing similar work.

MS. HART discussed why an Office of Outdoor Equity matters. She conveyed that Alaska's outdoor recreation economy is presently ranked sixth in the US in terms of its share of the state's economic outlook. In 2020, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis found that Alaska's \$2.3 billion outdoor recreation economy amounts to 3.2 percent of Alaska gross domestic product; 17,800 jobs, which is 5.4 percent of jobs; and \$981 million, which is 3.4 percent of wages and capitalization. Beyond economic output, outdoor recreation is a fun and cost-effective way to improve mental and physical health. Numerous academic studies demonstrate that time outside in nature can help mitigate depression and stress, combat obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, plus improve school test scores and foster better socialization skills, and healthier life habits.

MS. HART addressed why the need to focus on outdoor recreation and equity. She explained that despite so many Alaskans living near public lands, access to the outdoors and outdoor activities is often beyond the reach of many children in Alaska's biggest cities and most remote villages. She referenced Article 1 of the Alaska State Constitution regarding all persons being equal and entitled to equal rights, opportunities, and protections under the law. She cited the Mountain View neighborhood in Representative Tarr's district as an example of inequity of access. While only 10-12 miles from the Hilltop and Arctic Valley ski areas, the neighborhood's kids are hard pressed to gain access to gear, transportation, and money for lift tickets. The nonprofit SheJumps tries to fill these gaps but struggles to make ends meet to find gear, instructors, and transportation to get kids to the outdoor places just minutes from their homes.

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MS. HART stated that another inequity is access to resources to build outdoor recreation infrastructure. At the start of the pandemic, she recounted, the Alaska Outdoor Alliance conducted a survey by talking to communities across Alaska to get a snapshot of the need for outdoor recreation infrastructure. There was a widespread misconception that federal grant funds administered by the state, like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, are only available for land acquisition when these funds are also available to provide matching funds for projects. She said she wonders how many great projects are languishing because of this misconception, outdoor recreation infrastructure projects that would benefit the visitor industry, strengthen local economies, and strengthen the health and wellbeing of Alaskans. She added that the Alaska Outdoor Alliance is also looking at workforce development and on-the-job training programs by organizations. She said Alaska and Alaskans would benefit from strengthening programs to ensure curriculum creates talent pipelines to meet the hiring demands of today's public land managers, fish and game scientists, trail builders, landscape designers, community planners, and others.

MS. HART pointed out that, as heard from Representative Rubio of New Mexico, these offices can be run on a relative shoestring yet deliver impressive results that can last generations. With an Office of Outdoor Equity, she continued, Alaska would have at least one person whose job is to think, eat, and breathe about this every day, to break silos between divisions and departments that would help better leverage resources, to forge the kinds of public-private partnerships that can grow these programs, and to put less of a financial burden on the state. She urged the committee to support HCR 4.

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DIANA RHOADES, Director of Community Engagement, Anchorage Park Foundation, testified in support of HCR 4. She said the foundation's philanthropic mission is to build healthy parks and healthy people by supporting parks, trails, and recreational opportunities. As a fundraising organization, she continued, the foundation looks for grants to get new and diverse audiences into the outdoors and therefore an Office of Outdoor Equity would be fantastic.

MS. RHOADES stated that outdoor equity includes just making the state's public lands more accessible, more affordable, and safer. Along the line of equity, the foundation's Trails Initiative offers the Health on Trails program, as well as the

Schools on Trails program where she works with Title 1 schools to get kids outside with their teachers learning their lessons outdoors. Research shows that when kids take their lessons outside, they have better opportunities for learning.

MS. RHOADES said the foundation has a Youth Employment in Parks program that each summer provides 26 kids with 10 weeks of training in natural resources management. Funding comes from parents, families, individuals, government grants, and other grants. The kids work on projects throughout the week and then on Fridays they spend time in an outdoor recreation activity. For many of these kids this is their first time on an outdoor recreation adventure.

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MS. RHOADES said the Anchorage Park Foundation has a program called Inclusive Play, which works to make playgrounds more accessible. An example, she continued, is Anchorage's new Jewel Lake Park for which the foundation raised extra funds to install unitary surfacing for people in wheelchairs. Playgrounds installed on woodchips are not at all accessible to people in a wheelchair, so these kids are then left outside of play and unable to participate with their friends on the playground.

MS. RHOADES further related that the foundation's Dena'ina Indigenous Place Names Project is a partnership with the Native Village of Eklutna to bring indigenous place names to the area's parks and trails. The first one completed is at Chanshtnu Muldoon Park; the word chanshtnu means grassy creek. She said the Office of Outdoor Equity could be a place for Alaska's Native villages, people, and cultures across the state to go for having their stories told in Alaska's public lands.

MS. RHOADES related that during the time she worked for the National Park Service (NPS) from 2015-2017, the NPS looked at who goes to national parks and found that 70 percent of visitors were white and often older. The NPS realized that it needed to reach out to new and diverse audiences and to the next generation. Surveys found that people weren't using public lands because they didn't see themselves represented, and when not represented people don't feel safe. Public lands are not accessible if one doesn't see oneself in them.

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MS. RHOADES added that the park she worked at, Saguaro National Park, strove to get Latinos, the largest community in nearby Tucson, hired at NPS so that people would see themselves when they came to that park. Specialized tours for Latinos and their families were also given, she said. Reaching new and diverse audiences ensures a more accessible place for all and that there is a next generation of park and public land users. In 2017 the NPS also recognized that free passes into the parks were being given to anybody who turned 65, and it was realized that free passes could be given to others. Initially called Every Kid in a Park, 4<sup>th</sup> graders and their families could go to national parks for free. In 2019 it was expanded to all public lands and renamed Every Kid Outdoors.

MS. RHOADES closed her testimony by stating that if Alaska had an Office of Outdoor Equity, the Anchorage Park Foundation would apply for grants.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN related that the Juneau School District gets kids outside by providing hunter safety training for all sixth graders and learning to ski for all fourth graders. She asked whether the Anchorage School District has integrated any outdoor activity programs into its school system.

MS. RHOADES replied that through its Schools on Trails program, the foundation has worked with the Anchorage School District on taking kids outside, and there is also the Anchorage Outdoor School. While not a hunting program, the foundation's program gets kids outside and learning about integration into nature and the sciences.

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REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS offered his support for HCR 4. He noted that Alaska's state parks have been pressured to sustain themselves, and the price of just going to a trailhead has "priced out" poor families in Anchorage. At \$5 per visit, \$60 for a season, a poor family cannot spend that much money when the trade-off is food. For something as basic as hiking, a way must be found to allow poor families to use Alaska's state parks for free, he opined. Public use cabins now cost as much as a hotel, but there must be a way for those cabins to be accessible to families of all means. An income-scaled program, he suggested, is something that an Office of Outdoor Equity could coordinate.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether the New Mexico [Outdoor Equity Fund] is focused on youth education programs or on diversity and equity issues.

REPRESENTATIVE RUBIO responded that New Mexico's Outdoor Equity Fund specifically targets programs that are focused solely on youth and programming that will take young people outdoors. Priority is given to programs across the state for young people who are representative of communities that don't necessarily have much money.

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CHAIR PATKOTAK opened public testimony on HCR 4.

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RYAN O'SHAUGHNESSY, Executive Director, Trail Mix, Inc., testified in support of HCR 4. He noted that Trail Mix is a nonprofit that maintains and improves the Juneau trail system. During summer 2020, he continued, Trail Mix ran a workforce development program called the COVID-19 Conservation Corps with funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

MR. O'SHAUGHNESSY said creating an Office of Outdoor Equity would facilitate further workforce development programs and spur community-level economic revitalization. He stated that these kinds of programs would provide unemployed and underemployed Alaskans with a job and training to help advance their careers while maintaining and improving access to Alaska's public places and creating lasting outdoor infrastructure that supports the visitor economy. Trail building in general is entry level work that doesn't require higher education, only a willingness to learn. However, it allows people to gain technical skills, trades experience, and an introduction to fields like construction, carpentry, landscaping, and natural resource management. It also builds inter-personal skills for success, like group problem solving, communication, and teamwork.

MR. O'SHAUGHNESSY related that for the COVID-19 Conservation Corps, Trail Mix spent significant time and money on training, which provided tangible skills and certifications for employees to accomplish the work at hand and to take with them to other

jobs. A focus on training, he explained, is one way to decrease barriers for entry for people with underrepresented identities in the field. Workforce development programs for trails and natural resource stewardship can also expand beyond the skills needed in the field to include community consultation, planning, and design. Those kinds of things need training for workers to be able to understand and plan for the interplay between outdoor recreation, tourism, and cultural and subsistence use, which is essential in Alaska. These kinds of programs can also help folks have a skill set for the pre-construction skills related to trail building and outdoor recreation infrastructure. Planning, permitting, surveying, and grant writing are all essential to this kind of work.

MR. O'SHAUGHNESSY urged the committee to consider the Office of Outdoor Equity as an opportunity to build a reliable, homegrown workforce that would expand outdoor access across the state, especially in rural and under-resourced communities. "When we invest in trails, we invest in Alaska people and economy," he said in conclusion.

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CHAIR PATKOTAK, after ascertaining that no one else wished to testify, closed public testimony on HCR 4.

CHAIR PATKOTAK announced that HCR 4 was held over.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Resources Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:59 p.m.