

PROJECT BRIEF

US FOREST SERVICE - GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT CAPSTONE PROJECT

01

BACKGROUND

Across national public lands, repair needs on roads, buildings, utility systems, and other structures and facilities add up to tens of billions of dollars. In 2020, the US Congress passed The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) to help address this deferred maintenance and deliver benefits to the American public through major investments in recreation infrastructure and land and water conservation. The GAOA continues to provide funding for the US Forest Service (USFS) to begin addressing its approximately \$6 billion maintenance backlog throughout the country.

PURPOSE

To gain support for GAOA reauthorization in 2025 and to catalyze partner investments, the USFS needs to tell success stories and convey the impact that the GAOA has on people, communities, and public spaces. In coordination with the USFS GAOA strike team, the team in charge of allocating GAOA funds to National Forests around the country, the MENV Capstone team conducted interviews and site visits to develop communication materials that highlight GAOA benefits, generate partnerships, and demonstrate the importance of this program to Congress and the public. The team helped the USFS create captivating and engaging communications materials and supported the GAOA strike team to identify a future path forward on their communications strategy.



USFS GAOA Capstone Team
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PROJECT METHODS

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The MENV team identified key criteria for GAOA projects that would make for compelling stories. These criteria included geographic diversity, variety in project type, and economic and community impact. They then contacted the Public Affairs Officers from each of the nine USFS regions around the country to identify specific GAOA projects for further research and engagement.



Once projects were identified, the MENV team organized meetings with leaders and employees from each project. These included land managers, recreation specialists, engineers, partner organizations, and anyone else the team could track down who had an interesting perspective to share. The team interviewed these stakeholders to learn about project details and identify the most important angles for each story.



For three project sites, the students conducted field visits to gain hands-on familiarity with the impacts of GAOA funding. This provided an opportunity to gather their own photos and video footage for the storytelling deliverables. Additionally, they were able to speak to stakeholders in-person and learn more about the logistics and hard work that goes into maintenance projects on public lands.



After collecting research, footage, and stakeholder perspectives, the MENV team wrote stories to be featured on the USFS GAOA StoryMap. GAOA administrative team and officials from the respective National Forests edited and approved each story and then published them online. Each member of the MENV team also published one feature article on the USFS online blog, sharing agency stories about trails, land acquisition, and why volunteers are so crucial to public lands. Finally, the team produced a series of videos to be used by individual forests or the USFS at large to help promote the benefits and impact of the GAOA.



Throughout this project, the MENV team identified gaps and opportunities for improvement within the GAOA communications strategy. The team prepared a presentation to the whole GAOA strike team, as well as the Public Affairs Officers from the USFS regions to share some of the lessons learned and best practices recommended by the team.



The MENV team produced 15 communications deliverables. These consisted of four feature stories for the USFS website's homepage, eight narratives for the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund StoryMap, and three videos, all covering the maintenance work happening on USFS land thanks to GAOA funding.

The MENV team also gave a presentation to the GAOA strike team to improve their communication strategy. These deliverables will showcase the importance of GAOA reauthorization in 2025 to the public and members of Congress.

This project allowed the MENV team to strengthen their writing, practice video editing, improve their facilitation skills, and practice stakeholder engagement. The team learned about the implementation of federal land management acts and how community stakeholders contribute to the success of these projects.