

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Forest Service****Forest Service Manual 2300—
Recreation, Wilderness, and Related
Resource Management, Chapter
2350—Trail, River, and Similar
Recreation Opportunities, Section
2355—Climbing Opportunities**

AGENCY: Forest Service, Agriculture (USDA).

ACTION: Notice of availability for public comment.

SUMMARY: The United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, proposes to establish directive guidance on climbing opportunities on National Forest System lands and include requirements set forth in section 122 of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act for climbing in congressionally designated wilderness. The guidance also provides for climbing management on non-wilderness National Forest System lands pursuant to the Secretary of Agriculture's general land management authorities.

DATES: Comments must be received in writing by July 20, 2026.

ADDRESSES: Comments may be submitted electronically to <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?project=Directives-4622>. Written comments may be mailed to Forest Service National Recreation and Wilderness Programs, Sidney R. Yates Federal Building, 201 14th Street SW, Suite 2SW, Washington, DC 20250. All timely comments, including names and addresses, will be placed in the record and will be available for public inspection and copying. The public may inspect comments received at <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/ReadingRoom?project=Directives-4622>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: For additional information, please contact Josh Nadas, Forest Service National Recreation and Wilderness Programs, via email at SM.FS.ClimbDir@usda.gov or by phone 202–948–3053.

Individuals who use telecommunications devices for the hearing impaired may call 711 to reach the Telecommunications Relay Service, 24 hours a day, every day of the year, including holidays.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Climbing is a growing sport in the United States. According to the Outdoor Industry Association's 2022 report on outdoor participation trends, there were nearly 10.3 million climbers in the United States in 2021, of which approximately 2.3 million participated in sport or

boulder climbing and approximately 2.4 million participated in traditional ice or mountaineering climbing. The Access Fund, a nonprofit climbing advocacy group, estimates that approximately 30 percent of outdoor climbing in the United States occurs on National Forest System (NFS) lands. In recent years, Forest Service managers have expressed concerns about climbing-related impacts on NFS resources and conflicts among uses on NFS lands.

Current Forest Service directives do not provide guidance for climbing opportunities on NFS lands. Section 122 of the EXPLORE Act (Pub. L. 118–234), 16 U.S.C. 8422, directs the Secretary of Agriculture to issue guidance for recreational climbing activities in wilderness on NFS lands that (1) ensures that recreational climbing activities comply with applicable laws and regulations, (2) recognizes recreational climbing (including the use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors) as an appropriate use within components of the National Wilderness Preservation System, (3) describes requirements for the placement and maintenance of fixed anchors for recreational climbing in wilderness, and (4) includes direction for the continued use and maintenance of recreational climbing routes (including fixed anchors along the routes) in existence as of January 4, 2025.

Nothing in section 122 of the EXPLORE Act amends, modifies, or supersedes the Wilderness Act, and this proposal is intended to be implemented consistent with that statute. To implement section 122 of the EXPLORE Act with respect to wilderness—while exercising the Secretary's authority for non-wilderness areas—the Forest Service is proposing revisions to its directives to provide guidance on climbing opportunities on NFS lands.

The proposed directive would provide guidance on climbing opportunities inside and outside wilderness on NFS lands and would provide for climbing opportunities that serve visitor needs; meet land management and recreation policy objectives; emphasize the natural setting of NFS lands; align with natural and cultural resource protection and the Agency's responsibility to Indian Tribes; and are consistent with applicable law, directives, and the applicable land management plan.

The proposed directive would establish a new section, 2355, to Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2300—Recreation, Wilderness, and Related Resource Management, Chapter 2350—Trail, River, and Similar Recreation Opportunities. The new section would

provide that recreational climbing (including the use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors) is an appropriate use of NFS lands—including in wilderness—when conducted in accordance with applicable law and Forest Service directives and consistent with the applicable land management plan (proposed FSM 2355.03, para. 1); that a climbing management plan should be considered for development where the responsible official determines that planning direction is necessary to address resource conditions, visitor use patterns, use conflict, wilderness character considerations, or public safety concerns, and as funding and resources allow, with priority given to areas with the highest level of need (such as high levels of use, use conflicts, or resource degradation) (proposed FSM 2355.21); and promote stewardship opportunities and collaboration between the Forest Service and climbing organizations (proposed FSM 2355.03, para. 14).

The proposed directive also includes changes from the directive the Forest Service proposed on November 17, 2023 (88 FR 80269), on recreational climbing on NFS lands. The 2023 proposal stated that fixed anchors and fixed equipment were installations for purposes of section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act and would have required a case-specific minimum requirements determination for placement, replacement, or retention of fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness. The Forest Service received public comments on that proposal and, after enactment of section 122 of the EXPLORE Act, reevaluated that approach. In particular, the changes reflect the Secretary's reasoned exercise of discretion in interpreting and administering section 122 of the EXPLORE Act and section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1133(c)) in an area where the statutory text does not expressly address how fixed anchors should be treated under section 4(c). For over 30 years, the Forest Service has wrestled with the complex and controversial management topic of fixed anchors in wilderness at site-specific and national levels.

These efforts included establishing the Fixed Anchors in Wilderness Negotiated Rulemaking Advisory Committee in 1999, which failed to reach a consensus on recommendations for rulemaking. The approach proposed here is based on a reasoned interpretation of the applicable statutory text while also considering relevant legislative history, public comments received on the 2023 proposal, intervening enactment of section 122 of

the EXPLORE Act, and the Forest Service's management experience. The Forest Service also considered retaining the approach reflected in the 2023 proposal, including requiring a case-specific minimum requirements determination for placement, replacement, or retention of fixed anchors in wilderness, but concluded that the approach proposed here better balances wilderness stewardship, climber safety, administrative practicality, and the direction provided in section 122 of the EXPLORE Act while preserving consistency with the Wilderness Act.

Section 122 of the EXPLORE Act directs the Secretary to recognize that recreational climbing, including the use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors, may be an appropriate use within wilderness when undertaken in accordance with the Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act requires that wilderness areas be administered so as to preserve wilderness character, including their undeveloped condition and outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation, while providing for public recreational use in a manner that leaves the areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment. The proposed directive implements section 122 of the EXPLORE Act in a manner that preserves this statutory balance. It recognizes recreational climbing as a legitimate wilderness use, while reserving decision space at the local level to evaluate site-specific conditions, long-term impacts, and management needs consistent with preservation of wilderness character and other applicable law.

Specifically, this proposed directive reflects the Forest Service's interpretation that certain fixed anchors, when limited in scope and function and placed consistent with this direction, are distinguishable from other forms of fixed equipment or constructed features for purposes of administering section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act. In administering wilderness areas, the Forest Service generally does not require a minimum requirements analysis for certain limited use of fixed anchors, provided their placement and maintenance are consistent with applicable law, wilderness stewardship principles, and an approved climbing management plan where required. This interpretation is informed by the Agency's management experience and the direction provided in section 122 of the EXPLORE Act.

Nothing in this proposed direction alters the applicability of section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act or the requirement

to conduct a minimum requirements analysis where otherwise required by law. Further, nothing in this proposed directive limits the Forest Service's authority to evaluate site-specific circumstances or to determine that particular fixed anchors or related recreational climbing features warrant additional analysis or management action under the Wilderness Act or other applicable law.

To allow for enforcement of restrictions and prohibitions in climbing management plans as needed, the Forest Service will be proposing revisions via a separate **Federal Register** notice to its regulations at 36 CFR part 261, subpart A General Prohibitions.

On March 23, 2026, the Forest Service distributed a notification of the opportunity to consult, along with a summary of the proposed changes, to all federally recognized Tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and local Tribal contacts. Formal consultation sessions have not yet occurred; however, early written feedback has highlighted concerns regarding protection of cultural resources and sacred sites, the need to evaluate cumulative effects, the importance of thoughtful climbing management plans, and interest in how route development will be addressed.

All Tribal feedback, both early input and consultation comments, will be incorporated into the Tribal Summary Impact section of the directive. This engagement will continue to guide refinements to the proposed directive to ensure it aligns with Tribal interests, protects cultural resources, and supports the Forest Service's trust responsibilities.

After the comment period closes, the Forest Service will consider timely comments that are within the scope of the proposed directive in the development of the final directive. A notice of the final directive, including a response to comments, will be posted on the Forest Service's web page at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/regulations-policies>.

Gordon Blum,

Senior Executive, Recreation, Heritage, Volunteer Resources.

[FR Doc. 2026-12326 Filed 6-17-26; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3411-15-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Business-Cooperative Service

[RBS-26-BUSINESS-0397]

Notice of Funding Opportunity for the Intermediary Relending Program for Fiscal Year 2026

AGENCY: Rural Business Cooperative Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of funding opportunity (NOFO).

SUMMARY: The Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBCS or the Agency), a Rural Development (RD) agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is issuing a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to announce acceptance of loan applications under the Intermediary Relending Program (IRP). In future years, this funding opportunity will only be announced on the Agency website without a **Federal Register** notice. Therefore, in future years, neither the funding opportunity nor reference to the funding opportunity will appear in the **Federal Register**. Please make note of this change in location of the funding announcement in your records.

DATES: June 18, 2026.

ADDRESSES: The full IRP funding notice is available on the RBCS website. Program guidance may be obtained at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/intermediary-relending-program>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Lori Pittman, Program Management Division, Business Programs, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, MS 3226, Room 5160-S, Washington, DC 20250-3226, phone: (202) 720-9815, email: lori.pittman1@usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The full text of the Notice is available on the Agency website at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/intermediary-relending-program>.

(Authority: 7 U.S.C. 1989)

Victoria Collin,

Acting Administrator, Rural Business Cooperative Service.

[FR Doc. 2026-12270 Filed 6-17-26; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-XY-P