



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

[Docket No. FWS-HQ-NWRS-2026-1618; FXRS1261090000-267-FF09R20000]

Wilderness Administration and Resource Stewardship; Managing Climbing

Activities in Wilderness

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of availability; request for public comment.

SUMMARY: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces the availability of a draft national guidance memorandum and proposed revisions for two Service Manual chapters to fulfill the direction in Section 122 of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act governing the management of climbing activities in wilderness areas in the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) and, where applicable, the National Fish Hatchery System (NFHS). The draft guidance memorandum and Service Manual chapter amendments clarify our wilderness policy by adding explicit policy elements related to climbing routes and equipment. We invite comments from the public, and local, State, Tribal, U.S. Territories, and Federal agencies.

DATES: We must receive your written comments on or before [INSERT DATE 60 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*].

ADDRESSES: *Obtaining Documents:* You may obtain copies of the documents this notice announces, along with any comments and other materials that we receive, online in Docket No. FWS-HQ-NWRS-2026-1618 at <https://www.regulations.gov>.

Comment submission: All submissions must include the docket number FWS-HQ-NWRS-2026-1618 for this document. You must submit comments using one of the following methods:

- *Electronic submission:* Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <https://www.regulations.gov>. In the Search box, enter FWS–HQ–NWRS–2026–1618, which is the docket number for this action. Then click the Search button. On the resulting page, you may submit a comment by clicking on “Comment.” Please ensure that you have found the correct document before submitting your comments.

- *U.S. mail:* Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket No. FWS–HQ–NWRS–2026–1618, Policy and Regulations Branch, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MS: PRB (JAO/3W), 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041–3803.

Comments submitted through any method not authorized in this document, or sent to an address not listed here, will not be considered. We will not accept comments via email, fax, or hand delivery. We are not required to consider comments that are submitted after the comment period ends or that are submitted via a method outside of these instructions. Comments containing profanity, vulgarity, threats, or other inappropriate content will not be considered.

We will post all comments at <https://www.regulations.gov>. You may request that we withhold personal identifying information from public review; however, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. See **Public Comments** for more information.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Nick Kaczor, National Wilderness Coordinator, Branch of Wildlife Resources, nick_kaczor@fws.gov. Individuals in the United States who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability may dial 711 (TTY, TDD, or TeleBraille) to access telecommunications relay services.

Individuals outside the United States should use the relay services offered within their country to make international calls to the point-of-contact in the United States.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

In 2025, the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences

(EXPLORE) Act was signed into law (Public Law 118-234). EXPLORE Act Section 122, Protecting America's Rock Climbing (PARC), addresses recreational climbing and is codified at 16 U.S.C. 8422. PARC requires the Secretary of the Interior to issue guidance for recreational climbing activities on covered Federal land. PARC further directs that the guidance shall recognize that recreational climbing (including the use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors) is an appropriate use within a component of the National Wilderness Preservation System if undertaken in accordance with the Wilderness Act and other applicable laws (including regulations) and subject to appropriate terms and conditions to be determined by the Secretary.

Accordingly, the Service has prepared a draft guidance memorandum and amendments to Service Manual chapter 610 FW 1, General Overview of Wilderness Stewardship Policy, and 610 FW 2, Wilderness Administration and Resource Stewardship. To view the current manual chapters, visit <https://www.fws.gov/policy-library/610fw1> and <https://www.fws.gov/policy-library/610fw2>. The draft guidance memorandum and proposed amendments maintain compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C. 668dd–668ee) and the Wilderness Act of 1964 (16 U.S.C. 1131–1136).

Draft National Guidance on Recreational Rock Climbing on National Wildlife Refuge System and National Fish Hatchery Lands as Directed by the EXPLORE Act

The draft memorandum provides national guidance for the Service regarding the consideration and management of recreational rock climbing on lands administered by the NWRS and, where applicable, the NFHS. This guidance, in tandem with associated policy amendments, discussed below, fulfils the direction in Section 122 of EXPLORE Act. It clarifies how the Service will evaluate, authorize, and manage climbing activities, consistent with existing statutory authorities, Service policy, and purposes of the lands

administered by the Service. Rock climbing is not known to occur on any NFHS lands, however, this guidance establishes a framework for considering such proposals if they arise.

The draft memorandum is available for public review online in Docket No. FWS–HQ–NWRS–2026–1618 at <https://www.regulations.gov>.

Proposed Amendments to Service Manual Chapter 610 FW 1

In Service Manual chapter 610 FW 1, General Overview of Wilderness Stewardship Policy, we propose to add the following definitions to section 1.5:

- *Fixed Anchor*. Climbing equipment such as a bolt or piton that is left permanently in place to facilitate ascent, descent, or traverse of technical terrain.
- *Installation*. Anything made by humans that is not intended for human occupation and is left unattended or left behind when the installer leaves the wilderness.

Proposed Amendments to Service Manual Chapter 610 FW 2

In Service Manual chapter 610 FW 2, Wilderness Administration and Resource Stewardship, we propose to revise section 2.5A and add a new section 2.5D(6). These changes are described below.

Revised section 2.5A to read:

A. If a structure or installation existed before wilderness designation, we may retain it if we determine it is the minimum requirement to administer the area as wilderness and is necessary to accomplish the purposes of the refuge, including Wilderness Act purposes. Existing climbing routes established prior to January 4, 2025 (including fixed anchors along the routes) must be allowed to be used and maintained. We will remove or allow natural deterioration of all structures and installations that do not meet these criteria.

New section 2.5D(6) to read:

(6) Fixed Anchors. Fixed anchors for recreational rock climbing that are

necessary for the ascent or descent of a technical rock, ice, or mountain climb will not be considered installations, and therefore not subject to an MRA. The occasional placement and maintenance of a fixed anchor for belay, rappel, or protection purposes will be allowed in wilderness, and does not violate the Wilderness Act or necessarily impair the future enjoyment of wilderness. Fixed anchors should be used as a last resort when temporary anchors and equipment, which can be placed and removed without altering the environment (clean climbing), is not viable.

Public Comments

We invite comments from the public, and local, State, Tribal, U.S. Territories, and Federal agencies on the draft guidance memorandum and proposed Service Manual chapter amendments. All comments must be received by the date specified above. If you submit a comment at <https://www.regulations.gov>, your entire comment, including any personal identifying information, will be posted on the website. If you submit a hardcopy comment that includes personal identifying information, such as your address, phone number, or email address, you may request at the top of your document that we withhold this information from public review. However, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. Moreover, all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public disclosure in their entirety.

This request for public comment is entirely separate from the opportunity to provide comments on Wilderness Administration and Resource Stewardship; Request for Information that also published in today's *Federal Register*. If you wish to submit comments on the broader policy framework, please comment on Docket No. FWS–HQ–NWRS–2026–2575 at <https://www.regulations.gov>.

Cynthia Martinez,
Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System,
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

[FR Doc. 2026-11970 Filed: 6/12/2026 8:45 am; Publication Date: 6/15/2026]