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Kuster, outdoor leaders hold recreation powwow

Tom Eastman
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Shown Aug. 19 speaking about outdoor recreation issues with U.S. Rep. Annie Kuster (D-N.H., District 2), right, were (from left) Brandon Swartz, general manager of Attitash Mountain Ski Area; Ellen Chandler, executive director of the Jackson Ski Touring Foundation; Phil Bryce, director of the N.H. Division of Parks and Recreation; Jessyca Keeler, president of Ski NH, and Tyler Ray, executive director of Granite Backcountry Alliance and Granite Outdoor Alliance. (TOM EASTMAN PHOTO)

PINKHAM NOTCH — Camp Dodge Regional Trails Training Center was the setting last Friday for U.S. Rep. Annie Kuster (D-Hopkinton) to speak with regional outdoor leaders about the increases in popularity of outdoor recreation and the demands put on the resources of the White Mountain National Forest during the pandemic era the past few years.

Kuster, who represents the 2nd Congressional District, which now includes Jackson, Sandwich and Albany in addition to all of Coos County, was joined at the forum by Susan Arnold, interim president and CEO of the Appalachian Mountain Club; Amanda Peterson, AMC trail programs operations manager; Sarah Hankens, technical and public service staff officer, WMNF; Phil Bryce, director of the H. Division of Parks and Recreation; Jessyca Keeler, president of Ski NH; J.D. Crichton, general manager of Wildcat Mountain; Brandon Swartz, general manager of Attitash Mountain; Tyler Ray, founder of the Granite Backcountry Alliance; Ellen Chandler, executive director of Jackson Ski Touring Foundation; and Ed Butler, former Democratic state rep and co-owner of the Notchland Inn in Hart's Location.

“New Hampshire is home to the most beautiful land and outdoor recreation in the country — we have a responsibility to protect and preserve it,” said Kuster, whose father, Malcolm McLane, was one of the founders of nearby Wildcat Mountain and who shared during the conversation that she worked at Dartmouth College’s Moosilauke Hut a summer while ski racing for Dartmouth in winter.

She co-chairs the Bipartisan Ski and Snowboard Caucus and her knowledge about the challenges facing the outdoor recreation industry was apparent throughout 1 1/2 hour talk last Friday with outdoor leaders.

“Outdoor recreation has never been in more demand. While this is great news for our economy, it has also demanded creativity from the many stakeholders who manage and maintain the resources that draw visitors from around the world,” said Kuster.

Kuster is an outspoken advocate for New Hampshire's outdoor recreation and preservation in Congress. She co-sponsored the Great American Outdoors Act, which passed Congress and became law in 2020, to fully and permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund for the first time in the program's 56-year history.

Kuster was also a key supporter of the Inflation Reduction Act, which included historic investments in clean energy and combating the effects of climate change. The bill also invested billions of dollars in conservation and forestry programs.

"I look forward to continuing to promote and support New Hampshire's outdoor recreation economy," said Kuster at the conclusion of the discussion, and then was led on a short tour of Camp Dodge Regional Trails Training Center by Arnold and Peterson.

Kuster noted that the multi-use, year-round approach is key as New Hampshire draws use not only from snowmobilers but mountain bikers as well.

There has been more collaboration over the past few years among outdoor businesses and groups as they have found new ways to adapt to the challenges of the ski industry during the pandemic and the growth in popularity of outdoor sports, noting that New Hampshire is home to 125 snowmobiling clubs.

Ray, of North Conway, said it is an "exciting time" in the outdoor industry in the state."

"This has to be a revolutionary time period with the liquidity out there for helping one another and the enthusiasm we see with the AMC with the things that they've done — everyone else around here is a part of it," he said.

"It's just a big ecosystem. It's just really invigorating and it keeps me powered up at the same time," said Ray, whose GBA has worked collaboratively over the past decade with the Forest Service and private landowners to promote responsible trail use and trail building.

Arnold said the AMC was proud to host "a conversation about our shared goal of fostering a broader understanding of the outdoors while protecting our natural and recreational resources.

"It's exciting to see the growing recreational use in our region, but it brings with it new strains on our trail systems and other infrastructure, and new challenges to our efforts to protect fragile environments like the alpine zone," she said.

She underscored that climate change adds to those pressures with more extreme rain events, a longer mud season and reduced snowpack.

Two days prior, Kuster met with White Mountain Forest Service staff and leadership to hear about their ongoing work to manage the White Mountain National Forest and the challenges they are facing.

At last Friday's meeting, Kuster asked the WMNF's Hankens to provide an overview of funding projects that are underway as a result of passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

"The White Mountain has been very grateful in terms of the amount of funding and the work that's been done. We so far in the last two years have received almost \$2 million in funding associated with the Great American Outdoors Act," she said.

She said the funding is focused on addressing deferred maintenance of infrastructure and trails across the White Mountain National Forest.

She said those projects include:

- The Androscoggin area trails project that's being implemented in partnership with the AMC, to address deferred maintenance regarding trails and restoring or rebuilding some tread to the interest of trail sustainability and increased use during the COVID era.

- Great Gulf Wilderness Trail, Great Gulf Lane, Connie’s Way, Unknown Pond and a variety of places, with work having started this summer and planned to go through next summer.
- Glen Ellis Falls reconstruction visitor site with a rebuild of the CCC-era built parking area and the day use facilities;
- Snowmobile bridges and bridges in general.
- Sawyer River bridge replacement project.

Bryce said when the Forest Service changed its rules regarding bridges a few years ago, although it added to the required engineering work, all offices of the National Forest have been “easy to work with” and also noted that they worked with the state and snowmobile clubs on funding and solutions.

For more, go to kuster.house.gov.

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Reporter