



June 2023

# VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

## GI Bill Benefits Can Help Lead to Outdoor Recreation Careers

Accessible Version

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106149](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Some veterans leave military service with wilderness survival and other skills related to outdoor recreation. VA also provides eligible veterans with benefits to pursue additional education and training. However, little is known about the educational or employment pathways for veterans into the outdoor recreation sector.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, includes provisions for GAO to review veterans' use of educational benefits and pursuit of careers in outdoor recreation. This report describes the opportunities and challenges for veterans to (1) use the GI Bill and other VA benefits toward outdoor recreation education and (2) pursue federal employment in outdoor recreation.

GAO identified GI Bill-approved outdoor recreation education programs as of 2022 using VA and Department of Education data. GAO also analyzed 2021 OPM data—the most recent available—on federal employment at four agencies with missions connected to the outdoors: the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, NOAA, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. GAO also interviewed officials at these four agencies and reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations.

In addition, GAO interviewed officials at VA and outdoor recreation certificate programs selected based on veteran enrollment and approval for VA educational benefits. GAO also interviewed representatives of an outdoor recreation industry association and veteran advocacy groups.

View [GAO-23-106149](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov)

June 2023

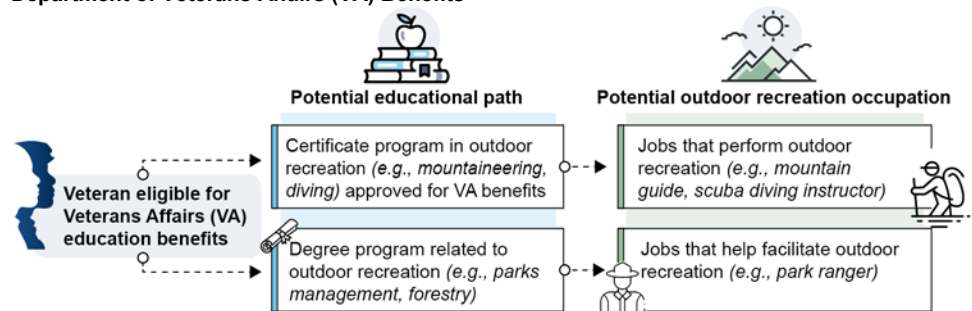
## VETERANS EMPLOYMENT

### GI Bill Benefits Can Help Lead to Outdoor Recreation Careers

## What GAO Found

Eligible veterans can use the GI Bill and other education benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to pursue certificate or college degree programs related to outdoor recreation. This is a \$159 billion industry involving outdoor physical activities, such as skiing or fishing, according to a 2021 federal estimate. GAO identified 34 GI Bill-approved certificate programs and about 1,400 college degree programs related to outdoor recreation. However, veterans may face challenges pursuing outdoor recreation education, such as the seasonality or specific locations of some programs. For example, some courses in avalanche rescue are available only in mountainous regions during the winter.

#### Examples of Veterans' Potential Education Pathways to Outdoor Recreation Careers Using Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits



Source: GAO analysis of program data from Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education. | GAO-23-106149

#### Text for Examples of Veterans' Potential Education Pathways to Outdoor Recreation Careers Using Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits

Veteran eligible for Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits:

- Potential educational path
  - Certificate program in outdoor recreation (e.g., mountaineering, diving) approved for VA benefits
  - Degree program related to outdoor recreation (e.g., parks management, forestry)
- Potential outdoor recreation occupation
  - Jobs that perform outdoor recreation (e.g., mountain guide, scuba diving instructor)
  - Jobs that help facilitate outdoor recreation (e.g., park ranger)

Source: GAO analysis of program data from Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education; GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106149

In 2021 federal agencies employed about 4,900 veterans in a number of outdoor recreation positions. These veterans comprised 11 percent of the more than 44,000 federal outdoor recreation employees, according to GAO's analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data. GAO identified 11 federal outdoor recreation positions at the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Officials at these agencies told GAO that they attract veterans to outdoor recreation positions through career fairs, internships, and other programs or initiatives. More than one-third of these employees hold seasonal or part-time jobs. This can deter veterans seeking full-time, year-round employment from pursuing these careers. Further, federal officials told GAO that some outdoor

recreation jobs are entry level and low paying, and thus may not be a good fit for veterans who are transitioning to civilian employment mid-career.

**Most Common Federal Outdoor Recreation Positions for Veterans, as of 2021**

<b>Outdoor recreation position category</b>	<b>Number of veterans employed</b>
Forestry technician	1,710
General natural resources management and biological sciences	967
Maintenance mechanic (e.g., trail worker)	959
Park ranger	732

Source: GAO analysis of September 2021 Office of Personnel Management data for selected agencies.

Note: For more details, see Table 1 in GAO-23-106149.

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## Abbreviations

Education	Department of Education
Interior	Department of the Interior
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
SAA	State Approving Agency
USDA	Department of Agriculture
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

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June 6, 2023

The Honorable Jon Tester  
Chairman  
The Honorable Jerry Moran  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate  
The Honorable Mike Bost  
Chairman  
The Honorable Mark Takano  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
House of Representatives

The federal government's commitment to those who served in the military includes helping them pursue education and gain employment skills to succeed in the civilian workforce. In fiscal year 2022, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) assisted over 620,000 veterans pursuing education through the GI Bill programs.<sup>1</sup> Some veterans also leave military service with wilderness survival and related skills that are applicable to careers in outdoor recreation, an estimated \$159 billion annual industry in 2021 employing millions across the public and private sectors.<sup>2</sup> In addition, some studies suggest that outdoor recreation activities (e.g., fishing) may be beneficial to veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, *Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2022*, (February 2023).

<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of this engagement, outdoor recreation refers to recreational activities undertaken for pleasure that (1) generally involve some level of intentional physical exertion and (2) occur outdoors in nature-based environments. The Bureau of Economic Analysis estimated that conventional outdoor recreation activities, which include skiing and hunting, added \$159 billion of value to the 2021 U.S. gross domestic product. See Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2021*, BEA 22-55 (November 9, 2022).

<sup>3</sup>M. Wheeler, et al., "Outdoor recreational activity experiences improve psychological wellbeing of military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder: Positive findings from a pilot study and a randomized controlled trial," *PLoS ONE* vol. 15, no. 11 (2020): e0241763, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241763>.

However, little is known about the educational or employment pathways for veterans into the outdoor recreation sector.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, includes provisions for GAO to review veterans' use of educational benefits and pursuit of careers in outdoor recreation.<sup>4</sup> This report describes opportunities and associated challenges for veterans to (1) use the GI Bill programs and related VA benefits toward outdoor recreation education and (2) pursue federal employment in outdoor recreation.

To describe veterans' use of VA benefits toward outdoor recreation education, we identified eligible education programs using VA and Department of Education (Education) data. Specifically, we used data from VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool database and a list of key outdoor recreation activities developed by the Bureau of Economic Analysis to identify outdoor recreation certificate programs that VA had approved as of June 2022.<sup>5</sup> We also used VA data from 2020, the most recent available, to identify the number of GI Bill beneficiaries enrolled in these certificate programs that year. In addition, we used data from Education's College Scorecard database to identify colleges offering outdoor recreation-related degree programs as of 2022. We assessed the reliability of these data sources by reviewing data documentation, performing logic tests on the data, and interviewing agency officials from VA and Education. As a result of this assessment, we concluded that the VA and Education data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. We also interviewed officials at state agencies that approve programs for VA educational benefits and at selected outdoor recreation certificate programs.<sup>6</sup>

To describe veterans' federal employment in outdoor recreation careers, we analyzed employment opportunities and interviewed officials about veteran hiring initiatives at four federal agencies with missions connected to the outdoors: the Department of Agriculture (USDA); Department of the

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<sup>4</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-103, div. S, tit. II, § 201, 136 Stat. 49, 822-23.

<sup>5</sup>We analyzed June 2022 data from the GI Bill Comparison Tool, an interactive webpage veterans can use to research colleges and other educational programs that are approved for the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and other VA benefit programs.

<sup>6</sup>We selected these certificate programs based on veteran enrollment and approval for VA educational benefits. We spoke with officials at four outdoor recreation programs that focus on mountain guiding, scuba diving, and wilderness survival. Comments from these interviews are not generalizable.

Interior (Interior); National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. We identified outdoor recreation positions at these agencies by analyzing Office of Personnel Management (OPM) occupational series and gathering input from agency officials.<sup>7</sup> We then analyzed 2021 data from OPM's Enterprise Human Resources Integration system on the number of veterans that held these positions and certain characteristics of their employment (e.g., full- vs. part-time positions).<sup>8</sup> We assessed the reliability of OPM's data by reviewing data documentation, performing logic tests on the data, and interviewing agency officials. We also reviewed prior GAO and OPM work assessing the reliability of these data. As a result of this assessment, we concluded that the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

In addition, we reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations. We also interviewed officials at VA, an outdoor recreation industry association, and veteran advocacy groups involved with either student veterans or outdoors issues.<sup>9</sup>

We conducted this performance audit from July 2022 to May 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>7</sup>Using this approach, we identified 11 federal positions in which employees may work outside as part of their job duties to support recreational activities.

<sup>8</sup>The Enterprise Human Resources Integration system is OPM's primary data warehouse to support the agency's human capital management activities. We examined data on federal government employment as of September 2021, the most recent data available at the time we performed our analysis.

<sup>9</sup>We also interviewed two veterans in federal outdoor recreation positions about their experiences in these careers. Comments from this interview are not generalizable.



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## Background

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### VA Benefits Programs

VA administers several benefits programs that can help veterans pay for their education and career training. The largest VA education benefit programs are the GI Bill programs, particularly the Post-9/11 GI Bill program.<sup>10</sup> GI Bill beneficiaries can use their benefits for a range of learning opportunities, including undergraduate and graduate degrees and non-degree programs, such as certificate programs. For veterans receiving full Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, VA generally will pay the actual net cost of in-state tuition and fees at public colleges and the lesser of (1) the actual net cost for tuition and fees, and (2) an annually-determined maximum amount at nonpublic, for-profit, or foreign schools (generally \$26,381 for the 2022-2023 school year).<sup>11</sup> The program also provides additional payments for housing and books directly to eligible veterans. In fiscal year 2022, VA provided \$8.1 billion in benefits for over 564,000 Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries.

In addition to the GI Bill program, VA administers the Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program, which can pay tuition and fees for education and training to help veterans with service-connected disabilities reenter the workforce.<sup>12</sup> VR&E can also provide additional assistance, including career counseling and short-term employment services like job

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<sup>10</sup>See generally 38 U.S.C. Chapters 30 and 33. VA education benefits available to veterans who meet the eligibility criteria include the Post-9/11 GI bill benefits, Montgomery GI Bill Active Duty benefits, and Montgomery GI Bill Selected reserve benefits, among others.

<sup>11</sup>See generally 38 U.S.C. §§ 3311 and 3313. For the Post-9/11 GI Bill, full benefits are generally available to qualified veterans who, beginning on or after September 11, 2001, served on active duty for at least 36 months, or, if discharged or released from active duty for a service-connected disability, for at least 30 continuous days, or were awarded the Purple Heart for service in the Armed Forces on or after September 11, 2001. The amount of Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits that a veteran is eligible to receive varies based on their length of service and is generally up to 36 months of benefits.

<sup>12</sup>To be entitled to VR&E services and related benefits, veterans generally must (1) have a qualifying service-connected disability rating from VA and (2) be in need of rehabilitation because of an employment handicap. See also, GAO, *Veterans with Disabilities: VA Could Better Inform Veterans with Disabilities about Their Education Benefit Options*, [GAO-21-450](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul 28, 2021).

search assistance.<sup>13</sup> Veterans enrolled in training may also be eligible to receive a monthly subsistence allowance to assist them with living expenses. Subject to the approval of their VR&E counselor, veterans with service-connected disabilities may use their VR&E benefits to pay for education at outdoor recreation certificate and degree programs, in preparation for careers in the outdoor recreation industry.<sup>14</sup> VR&E counselors work with veterans to design individualized service plans and identify training and services needed to help them achieve their employment goals. In fiscal year 2022, VR&E provided approximately \$1.5 billion in benefits for around 124,000 veterans.<sup>15</sup>

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## School and Program Approval Process for Veterans Education Benefit Programs

VA is responsible for overseeing schools and programs that enroll veterans who are using VA education benefits. To provide this oversight, VA enters into agreements with State Approving Agencies (SAA) to help approve and monitor schools and programs within each state. Veterans may use GI Bill benefits for approved programs, but the approval process and requirements vary depending on the type of program. For example, degree programs at colleges that are eligible for federal student aid and accredited by a Department of Education-recognized accrediting entity are generally deemed approved for GI Bill benefit purposes by SAAs. SAA review of non-accredited courses (such as those offered at some outdoor skills schools) involves a review of the program's course outlines and fee schedules, among other things. In addition, sports or athletics courses (e.g., fishing or skiing) are generally presumed to be recreational, and will not be approved, unless the enrollee establishes that the course has a bona fide use in pursuing his or her vocational objective.

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## Veterans Can Use VA Education Benefits at Different Types of Outdoor Recreation

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<sup>13</sup>Under VR&E, veterans may generally receive up to 48 months of vocational rehabilitation services and up to an additional 18 months of certain employment services.

<sup>14</sup>VA officials told us that to the maximum extent practicable, veterans use their VR&E benefits toward programs already approved for the GI Bill. However, veterans with service-connected disabilities may use VR&E benefits at non-GI Bill-approved programs, subject to the approval of the executive director of VR&E.

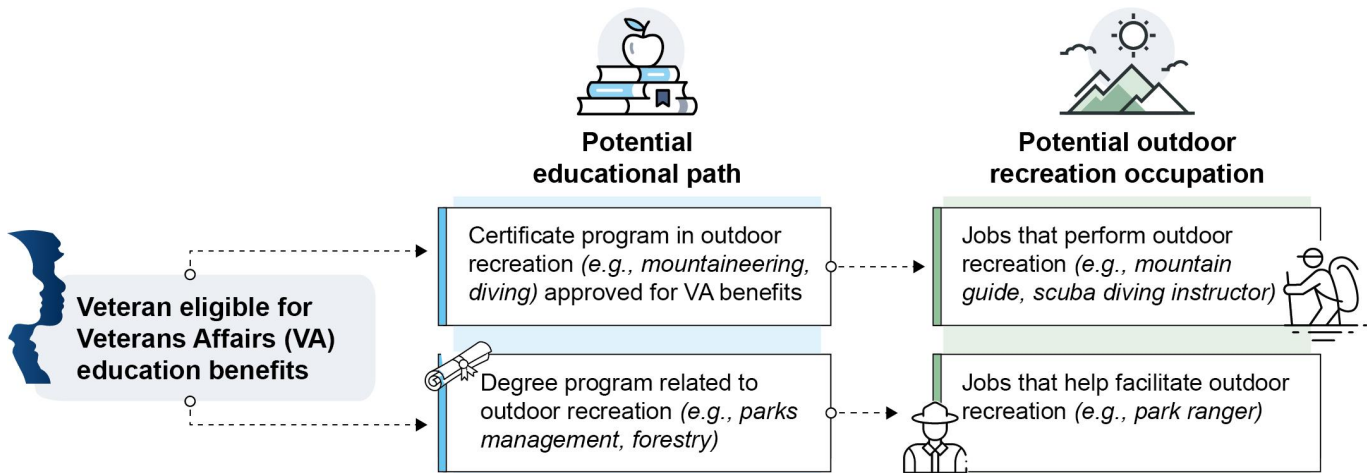
<sup>15</sup>Approximately 89,400 VR&E beneficiaries received subsistence as part of education or training services.

## Education Programs, but Some Veterans May Face Challenges Unique to the Field

### Veterans Can Use VA Education Benefits to Pursue Certificate Programs or College Degrees Related to Outdoor Recreation

Veterans interested in pursuing outdoor recreation careers can use VA education benefits to obtain training through two potential pathways. In general, they may enroll in approved (1) outdoor recreation certificate programs or (2) colleges with outdoor recreation-related degree programs (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1: Examples of Veterans’ Potential Education Pathways to Outdoor Recreation Careers**



Source: GAO analysis of program data from Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education; GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106149

**Text for Figure 1: Examples of Veterans’ Potential Education Pathways to Outdoor Recreation Careers**

Veteran eligible for Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits:

- Potential educational path
  - Certificate program in outdoor recreation (e.g., mountaineering, diving) approved for VA benefits
  - Degree program related to outdoor recreation (e.g., parks management, forestry)

- Potential outdoor recreation occupation
  - Jobs that perform outdoor recreation (e.g., mountain guide, scuba diving instructor)
  - Jobs that help facilitate outdoor recreation (e.g., park ranger)

Source: GAO analysis of program data from Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education; GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106149



### Outdoor Recreation Certificates

Outdoor recreation certificate programs provide students opportunities to enroll in courses to develop vocational skills in areas such as fly-fishing, canoeing, backpacking, mountain climbing rescue, and wilderness first aid. Graduates of these certificate programs may seek careers as guides or instructors using the skills learned in these courses (e.g. mountain guide, scuba diving instructor).



Source: GAO summary of outdoor recreation certificates and discussions with outdoor recreation education stakeholders. | GAO-23-106149

Outdoor recreation certificate programs generally prepare students for careers guiding or instructing outdoor recreation activities, such as scuba diving, mountain climbing, and hunting. We identified 34 GI Bill-approved outdoor recreation certificate programs located in 16 states, according to VA data as of June 2022.<sup>16</sup> We found that 431 veterans used their GI Bill benefits at 20 of these certificate programs in 2020, according to the most recent data available.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Based on a list of outdoor recreation activities developed by the Bureau of Economic Analysis and stakeholder recommendations, we used 116 key terms to identify approved outdoor recreation certificate programs in VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool database. Using this method, we were unable to identify approved certificate programs that did not include at least one of these key outdoor recreation activities in the name, and thus we could have undercounted approved outdoor recreation certificate programs.

<sup>17</sup>The remaining 14 GI Bill-approved outdoor recreation certificate programs that we identified did not enroll GI Bill recipients in 2020.



### Outdoor Recreation-Related Degrees

Outdoor recreation-related college degrees provide students opportunities to enroll in courses such as outdoor recreation administration, natural resource management, adventure leadership, and physical and social sciences. Graduates of these programs may seek careers in public agencies or private businesses that provide outdoor recreational and tourism experiences.

Source: GAO summary of outdoor recreation related degrees and discussions with outdoor recreation education stakeholders | GAO-23-106149



Some colleges also offer outdoor recreation-related undergraduate and graduate degree programs in disciplines such as natural resources conservation and research (e.g., environmental science), outdoor education, and forestry. These degree programs can prepare students to facilitate or administer outdoor recreation and education in parks and protected areas. We identified about 1,400 colleges with outdoor recreation-related degree programs that were eligible for VA benefits (i.e., GI Bill and VR&E), according to our analysis of Education's College Scorecard data.<sup>18</sup> These colleges, which are dispersed across all U.S. states, offered around 3,100 distinct outdoor recreation-related degree programs.<sup>19</sup>

## Challenges for Veterans Pursuing Outdoor Education May Include Seasonality of Program Offerings

Veterans pursuing outdoor recreation education may face challenges—some of which are unique to the field—according to officials at outdoor recreation certificate programs, SAAs, and a veteran advocacy group we interviewed:

- Seasonality and geographic location of program offerings.** Veterans may face challenges accessing programs that are limited to certain times of the year within specific geographic regions. For example, some courses in avalanche rescue or ice climbing are available only in mountainous regions during the winter. Veterans who are interested in avalanche rescue or ice climbing careers may need to travel to these regions during winter months to obtain training. However, an official we spoke to at a mountain guiding certificate program said that, in his experience, veterans are comfortable with traveling for training, as many became accustomed to deploying and traveling while serving in the military.

<sup>18</sup>We identified colleges with degree programs related to outdoor recreation based on relevance to federal outdoor recreation occupation descriptions and this report's definition of outdoor recreation. We included the following College Scorecard fields of study in our count of programs: natural resources conservation and research; natural resources management and policy; fishing and fisheries sciences and management; forestry; wildlife and wildlands science and management; natural resources and conservation; parks, recreation and leisure studies; parks, recreation and leisure facilities management; outdoor education; and parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness.

<sup>19</sup>Data on how many veterans enrolled or graduated from these specific programs are not available.

- **Some outdoor recreation certificate programs do not have GI Bill approval.** Veterans interested in pursuing outdoor recreation education may be unable to use GI Bill benefits toward certain certificate programs. For example, one certificate program that provides advanced mountain guide training is not currently approved for use of GI Bill benefits. However, another program offers a GI Bill-approved mountain guiding certificate program for beginning- and intermediate-level training. An official at the non-approved program said they are not currently pursuing GI Bill approval because they are concerned about the administrative burden it may create for their organization. On the other hand, officials at an approved scuba diving certificate program said that the GI Bill approval process was not administratively burdensome because the process was similar to steps they had already taken to obtain a state operating license. In addition, both SAA officials and school officials at approved outdoor recreation certificate programs said that SAAs provide significant technical assistance to schools seeking GI Bill approval.
- **General challenges associated with pursuing higher education.** As we have previously reported, in general veterans may face broader challenges pursuing higher education, including adjusting to civilian life and dealing with service-related disabilities, in addition to balancing family obligations.<sup>20</sup> This prior work found that these challenges can put student veterans at greater risk of not completing their academic degree programs. For example, representatives from a group that advocates for student veterans told us that some veterans experience challenges pursuing higher education due to service-connected disabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

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## Several Thousand Veterans Are Employed in Federal Outdoor Recreation Positions, but Some Veterans May Face Challenges Pursuing These Careers

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<sup>20</sup>GAO, *VA Education Benefits: VA Needs to Improve Program Management and Provide More Timely Information to Students*, [GAO-13-338](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 22, 2013).

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## Federal Agencies Employed about 4,900 Veterans in Outdoor Recreation Positions, and Attract Veterans through Hiring Initiatives

About 4,900 veterans were employed in outdoor recreation positions at federal agencies with missions connected to the outdoors, according to our analysis of 2021 employment data.<sup>21</sup> These agencies include the Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of the Interior, Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—which together comprise the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation.<sup>22</sup>

We identified 11 federal positions in which employees may work outside as part of their job duties to support recreational activities—including forestry technician, park guide, park ranger, landscape architect, and fish biologist.<sup>23</sup> Of these federal positions, the greatest number of veterans were employed as forestry technicians and in the general fields of natural resources management and biological sciences.<sup>24</sup> (See table 1.)

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<sup>21</sup>We analyzed employment data from OPM's Enterprise Human Resources Integration system as of September 2021, the most recent data available at the time of our analysis.

<sup>22</sup>The Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation focuses on improving access to nature, expanding outdoor recreation opportunities, and providing the public with improved and more affordable experiences on public lands and waters. On the council, Interior is represented by five component agencies—the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service. USDA is represented by the Forest Service, and the Department of Commerce is represented by NOAA.

<sup>23</sup>We analyzed data on the following federal occupations at USDA, Interior, NOAA, and the Army Corps of Engineers: (1) outdoor recreation planning; (2) park ranger; (3) park guide; (4) recreation aid and assistant; (5) general natural resources management and biological sciences; (6) forestry; (7) forestry technician; (8) fish and wildlife administration; (9) fish biology; and (10) landscape architect. We also analyzed data on maintenance mechanics at Interior, where the classification includes trail workers. Other positions may indirectly support outdoor recreation through the overarching agency mission, but we did not include positions unless OPM's description indicated that employees may work outside.

<sup>24</sup>Not all personnel in these positions work in an outdoor recreation capacity. For instance, some foresters provide services to the public at campgrounds and other recreation areas as part of their duties, while others may have duties less aligned without outdoor recreation.

**Table 1: Total and Veteran Employees in Federal Outdoor Recreation Positions, as of September 2021**

Federal outdoor recreation position category	Total employees in outdoor recreation positions	Veteran employees in outdoor recreation positions
Forestry technician	17,382	1,710
General natural resources management and biological sciences	12,424	967
Park ranger	5,243	732
Maintenance mechanic (e.g., trail worker)	3,613	959
Fish biology	2,043	118
Forestry	1,746	160
Park guide	875	135
Outdoor recreation planning	401	49
Fish and wildlife administration	346	<21
Landscape architect	273	<21
Recreation aid and assistant	133	<21
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,479</b>	<b>4,872</b>

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data. | GAO-23-106149

Note: GAO analyzed employment at the Department of the Interior, Department of Agriculture, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for all of the above position categories except maintenance mechanic. GAO limited its analysis of maintenance mechanics to the Department of the Interior where this classification includes trail workers.

Veterans comprised a smaller proportion of employees in outdoor recreation positions than in the larger federal workforce. For instance, veterans accounted for 11 percent of federal outdoor recreation employees. (See table 2.) By contrast, veterans made up about 18 percent of employees across all occupations at the corresponding agencies.

**Table 2: Total and Veteran Outdoor Recreation Employees at Selected Federal Agencies, as of September 2021**

Agency	Total outdoor recreation employees	Veteran outdoor recreation employees	Percentage of outdoor recreation employees that are veterans
Department of Agriculture	21,334	1,899	8.9%
Department of the Interior	17,974	2,406	13.4%
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	3,676	515	14.0%
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	1,495	52	3.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,479</b>	<b>4,872</b>	<b>11.0%</b>

Source: GAO analysis of Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data. | GAO-23-106149

Note: GAO analyzed data on the following federal position categories at these agencies: (1) outdoor recreation planning; (2) park ranger; (3) park guide; (4) recreation aid and assistant; (5) general natural resources management and biological sciences; (6) forestry; (7) forestry technician; (8) fish



and wildlife administration; (9) fish biology; and (10) landscape architect. GAO also analyzed data on maintenance mechanics at the Department of the Interior, where they may work as trail workers. Other positions may indirectly support outdoor recreation through the overarching agency mission, but GAO did not include positions unless OPM's description indicated that employees may work outside.

Federal officials we interviewed said their agencies have several programs and initiatives to attract veterans to outdoor recreation positions. For instance, many veterans pursuing federal employment can use veterans' hiring preference, a system that provides special consideration to certain veterans who pursue federal civilian employment.<sup>25</sup> About 88 percent of veterans in federal outdoor recreation careers were eligible for veterans' preference, according to our analysis of OPM data. This is in line with the 90 percent of veterans eligible for veterans' preference in all positions at these agencies.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond veterans' preference, officials at these four agencies described various programs or initiatives to attract veterans to work in outdoor recreation positions.

- **Skill training.** Interior officials told us the department participates in the Department of Defense's SkillBridge program. This program offers service members the opportunity to gain civilian work experience through training, apprenticeships, or internships during their last 180 days of military service. Active duty service members have used this program at Interior to pursue positions in national parks, according to Interior officials. In addition, NOAA officials we interviewed reported that they provide veterans opportunities to train in fisheries habitat restoration through the agency's Veterans Corps Fisheries Program.
- **Recruitment.** USDA and Army Corps officials told us their agencies recruit veterans at career fairs.
- **Internships.** Interior officials told us the agency participates in the Department of Defense's Operation Warfighter. This program offers opportunities for service members recovering from injury to gain civilian work experience and develop their job skills through internship programs.

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<sup>25</sup>Veterans who are disabled or who served on active duty in the Armed Forces during certain specified time periods or in military campaigns are entitled to preference over others in hiring. See generally 5 U.S.C. § 3309. In addition to receiving preference in competitive appointments, veterans may be considered for special noncompetitive appointments for which only they are eligible. See, e.g., 5 U.S.C. § 3112.

<sup>26</sup>Veterans had eligibility for preference noted on their personnel file in the 2021 OPM data we analyzed. However, data do not exist in the OPM EHRI database to determine whether veterans were hired to a specific position using preference as a criterion.

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- **Strategic planning.** Within Interior, the National Park Service's strategic plan includes a goal to assist veterans with the transition into the civilian workforce through skills training, job matching, and employment opportunities with public land management agencies.

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### Challenges to Veterans Pursuing Federal Outdoor Recreation Employment Include the Seasonal or Part-Time Nature of the Jobs

Veterans may face some challenges when pursuing federal outdoor recreation positions, including those that pertain to the nature of the positions themselves. For instance, the seasonal nature of some of these outdoor recreation positions can deter veterans seeking year-round, full-time employment from pursuing these careers, according to outdoor recreation industry officials. Federal outdoor recreation positions are more frequently seasonal or part-time assignments than other types of federal employment.<sup>27</sup> About 38 percent of federal outdoor recreation employees were either seasonal or part-time, compared to 11 percent of all federal government employees, according to our analysis of 2021 federal employment data.

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<sup>27</sup>For the purposes of this report, we consider positions to be seasonal or part-time assignments unless employees are in non-seasonal, full-time, and permanent work statuses.

**Perspectives from veterans in outdoor recreation positions:**

Working in outdoor recreation leverages many skills that veterans possess—including initiative, adaptability, and leadership. While some veterans may struggle with the seasonal nature of many of these positions, others thrive working in outdoor recreation because of the therapeutic nature and mission of the work.

Source: GAO interview with veterans in outdoor recreation positions. | [GAO-23-106149](#)

Note: The selected observation reflects themes raised in GAO's conversation with two veterans in outdoor recreation positions and is not generalizable.

For certain outdoor-related positions, the majority of employees are either seasonal or part-time. For example, over 63 percent of both park guide and forestry technician positions were seasonal or part-time. Officials at an outdoor recreation industry group told us that the seasonality of these positions, as well as the potential need to move frequently to maintain employment, can create challenges for veterans looking to pursue these careers. Furthermore, federal officials told us that some outdoor recreation jobs are low paying, entry-level positions, and thus may not be a good fit for veterans who are transitioning to civilian employment mid-career.<sup>28</sup>

Veterans may also face challenges obtaining outdoor recreation employment because these career paths are less well-known, according to federal officials and representatives from the outdoor recreation industry we interviewed. For instance, representatives from a group advocating for veterans in the outdoors told us that veterans may not realize careers in outdoor recreation are viable options. One way VA is raising awareness of these career paths is through its online employment tools, which include information on outdoor recreation careers. For instance, VA's online career assessment tool may suggest careers such as ski patrollers or fish and game wardens to veterans based on their specific interests.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Agriculture; Department of Commerce; Department of Defense; Department of Education; Department of the Interior; Department of Veterans Affairs; and Office of Personnel Management for review and comment. The Departments of Commerce, the Interior, and Veterans Affairs provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. The remaining four agencies informed us that they had no comments on the draft report.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and other interested

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<sup>28</sup>Our prior work has highlighted veterans' concerns around the lack of opportunities for advancement across the federal government. See, GAO, *Veteran Federal Employment: OPM Agencies Could Better Leverage Data to Help Improve Veteran Retention Rates*, [GAO-20-592](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2020).

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parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or at [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix I.

*Melissa Emrey-Arras*

Melissa Emrey-Arras, Director  
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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# Appendix I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

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## GAO Contact

Melissa Emrey-Arras, (617) 788-0534 or [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact named above, Will Colvin (Assistant Director), Jon Muchin (Analyst-in-Charge), and Tracie Sánchez made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were Rashmi Agarwal, Caroline DeCelles, Sara Daleski, Jonathan Dent, Holly Dye, Kirsten Lauber, Aaron Olszewski, Sara Pelton, Rebecca Sero, and Curtia Taylor.

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