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Opening Statement of
Chairman Rob Bishop
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
On Friday, April 4, 2014
1324 Longworth House Office Building Legislative Hearing on
H.R. __, H.R. 2743, and H.R. 3976

Today we will be considering three bills. Two that would provide discount passes for our nation's veterans and a discussion draft for the reauthorization of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLUH-REE-AH, in government-speak) which expires next year.

FLREA is the program that authorizes the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, BLM, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Forest Service to charge fees at developed recreation facilities on federal lands and waters when special services are provided. The agencies can then retain and spend the revenue from fees with most of the money retained at the collection site.

FLREA also authorizes the sale of nation-wide passes including the discount passes that would be authorized by H.R. 2743 and H.R. 3976.

Charging fees on the public lands is a complicated issue that congress has been dealing with since 1914 when the first automobile fee was charged at Mount Rainer. America's vast system of public lands can, if managed wisely, provide our country with a great abundance of outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, energy, minerals timber and food. But to obtain these benefits our federal land managing agencies must stop thinking they are like the Sheriff of Nottingham whose job it was to keep people from entering the King's Forest.

Each year we in Congress appropriate billions of dollars collected from the already overburdened taxpayer to pay for visitor access, safety, services, and maintenance on our public lands. To encourage additional visitor facilities we also allow the agencies to charge FLREA fees in certain circumstances.

There are differences of opinion as to how these fees should be paid. Some believe that access to all public lands should generally be free, that the full cost of the managing these lands should be paid entirely by the general taxpayer. Others argue that the people who actually use these lands should pay, through entrance and user fees, a greater share than the taxpayers who may never choose to visit these places.

The goal of the discussion draft is to hear suggestions from the interested public and the agencies on what changes should be made in the program.

Today we will hear from witnesses who represent the federal agencies that administer FLREA as well those who have proposals for reforms of the program.

Several important issues need to be addressed.

-There is the fundamental question of where, when and who should be charged? Is the system of fees that we have now fair?

-How do we ensure that the public has ample opportunity to participate in determining where fees are charged and what the rates are?

-How should fee revenue be used? What should Congress do to ensure that the agencies are accounting for the revenue? The agencies cannot expect public support for the fee program if they do not know how the fees are being used.

-Outfitters and guides and other private organizations provide outstanding opportunities for visitors to get out and experience our public lands, but right now the bureaucracy and permit limitations are pushing these often small, family-run companies to the edge of extinction. What steps can congress take to ensure that these small businesses are able to thrive and continue to make recreation experiences available to a wide audience?

These are just a few of the questions this Subcommittee will need to consider as part of any FLREA extension.

The authorization for FLREA expires in December of 2015, but because some of the activities allowed under the act are multi-year, it is best for us to act well before the expiration date. Before we extend the program, however, we need to see what we can learn from the successes and failures of the current and past programs. In doing so, I want the agencies to come to realize that when the American people enter public land, they are not trespassing.

Let us then begin the hearing. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses.