

**STATEMENT BY DERRICK CRANDALL, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN RECREATION COALITION, ON EXTENSION OF AND REVISIONS TO THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT AT THE APRIL 4, 2014, HEARING OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES.**

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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members, the American Recreation Coalition (ARC) appreciates the opportunity to applaud the interest of Members of this committee and others in continuing and enhancing the experiences of the public as they visit a great American legacy – the federally managed lands and waters covering nearly one-third of the surface of this nation. There are many reasons to strengthen the connection between today's and tomorrow's Americans and the outdoors, and the topic of this hearing is a key means to pursue this connection.

I am Derrick Crandall and I am delighted to offer testimony on behalf of the members of the American Recreation Coalition – more than 100 national organizations, representing virtually every segment of the nation's \$650+ billion outdoor recreation industry, and tens of millions of outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Our organization has played an active role in federal recreation policy since its creation in 1979, especially on funding federal recreation programs. ARC played an active role in the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors in the 1980's, which served as the catalyst for a variety of important and successful funding initiatives ranging from expansion of the Dingell-Johnson program to the Recreational Trails Program and the Fee Demonstration Program of 1996, precursor to FLREA.

Outdoor recreation is a vital and positive force in our nation today. Many Americans participate in outdoor recreation today, and a major catalyst for this involvement is the marvelous shared legacy of our Great Outdoors – one in three acres of the surface of the nation managed by federal agencies and hosting well in excess of a billion recreation visits annually. Americans spend some \$650 billion annually on fun outdoors – and our Great Outdoors is a vital element in attracting international tourists.

The benefits accruing from recreation participation are significant, and the appreciation for these benefits is growing. The economic significance of outdoor recreation is obvious in communities across the nation, and especially those communities proximate to federally managed lands and waters. From boat dealers to campground operators, from RV manufacturers to ski rental shops, from retailers selling outdoors goods to guides and outfitters, tens of thousands of businesses and millions of Americans are supported by the expenditures on recreation by American families. And increasingly, America's recreational opportunities are a key factor in luring international visitors to enjoy the world's best systems of parks and forests, refuges and other public sites.

The role of recreation in addressing serious concerns about the increasing inactivity-related obesity of the American people, especially our young people, is also significant. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, seven in 10 deaths are attributable to preventable, chronic diseases – like diabetes, heart disease and some

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forms of cancer – associated with obesity and inactivity. In addition, a national study has shown that nearly 20,000 children and adolescents in the U.S. are diagnosed with diabetes every year. A critical cause is the tripling in the rate of obesity among young people since the 1970's. We believe that the average of eleven hours of daily screen-time is a major contributor. An important antidote to this alarming picture is more active fun through outdoor recreation. We also believe that recreation opportunities on our nation's public lands, including our national parks, are an essential asset in the effort to encourage people to change their behavior and start enjoying the outdoors.

Mr. Chairman, the recreation community appears here today to share its views on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), which this subcommittee helped to shape prior to its enactment in December 2004. FLREA authorizes the collection and retention of entrance and recreation fees for most of the major federal recreation providers: Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service. While management of recreation on our federal lands remains funded primarily by appropriations of general funds, FLREA supplements those appropriations with more than \$300 million annually in entrance fees, campground fees and other recreation-related charges.

We applaud the Congress for labeling this legislation appropriately. We testify today not in favor of fees, but in favor of ***Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement***. Fees are one important tool to help reach this goal – but FLREA fees are neither the only tool nor a goal in themselves. Recreationists pay for good recreation opportunities in many ways. Boating and fishing enthusiasts buy licenses and register boats and pay federal and state gas tax on the fuel used in their activities – and most of these special user fees help to provide access to public waters, support water quality and fisheries improvements, manage the enjoyment of these activities and more. Recreationists also aid the quality of recreation in other ways, including volunteerism and philanthropy. FLREA-authorized fees must be considered in this context.

Our support – and in fact overall public support – for well-designed and well-understood federal recreation fees is strong. In 2012, the agencies reported to the Congress visitor satisfaction with fees at rates that ranged from 83% (Forest Service) to 94% (National Park Service). However, recreation fees can cause controversy. In particular, some Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management fees have generated enough opposition to prompt senior and influential Senators from both political parties to introduce legislation to repeal FLREA.

We believe that most controversies surrounding FLREA-authorized fees result from agency failures to appreciate the role of fees as a tool, and not as an end in itself. Where the public seeks good facilities and services and finds them available at a federal recreation site, support for fees is high. In particular, support for retention of most collected fees for use at and near the collection point is high.

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Attitudes toward FLREA have been complicated by federal budgets and agency decisions which have reduced recreation access and services. The recreation community believes that much of the revenue collected under FLREA is simply offsetting reductions in general funding of federal recreation programs. This does not reflect the nature of the agreement when FLREA was created ten years ago. FLREA was to help in expanding the quantity and quality of recreation offerings on federal lands and waters: better trails and better campgrounds, easier access to public waters and more interpretive and educational opportunities.

Based upon nearly twenty years of experience with legislation which authorizes collection and retention of recreation fees, we support continuation of this authorization. We have worked with a large and diverse coalition of recreation, conservation and tourism organizations to articulate core principles which we feel should guide federal recreation fee policy. These principles have been submitted to the committee and are also attached to my testimony. I include them here, as well:

1. Federal recreation sites should be authorized to collect and retain fees for entrance to parks and selected other areas and for recreational services and visitor facilities involving significant investments and operational costs.
2. Collected fees should be used principally at sites where the fees were collected, serving those who paid the fees, and collected fees should be spent within a reasonable amount of time.
3. The US Army Corps of Engineers, the largest single federal provider of recreation experiences, should be included under FLREA to unify federal fee programs and eliminate current complications for visitors.
4. The federal recreation fee collection process should be as transparent as possible, allowing all interested parties the chance to see annual information on fee collections and use.
5. Expenses of fee collection are a legitimate use of fee revenues but all efforts should be made to minimize these costs.
6. Federal recreation site fee efforts can and should be integrated where possible with other fee collection programs, including of other federal sites and agencies and with state recreation fees and licenses. State fee programs should be encouraged which support recreation on federal lands - including trail programs. Models for this include the Winter Park Passes in several northwestern states and programs like the California "green sticker" program.

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7. Public involvement in federal recreation site fee programs is vital. The first step is better notification of fee program proposals. Notification of new and changed fees should be made to all obviously affected organizations and local citizens, and should also be made through: (1) the Federal Register and (2) alerts to individuals and organizations requesting notification through [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov), registering their interest in types of fees, geographical regions, agencies and other appropriate categories. Formal comment opportunities should be required and can include Recreation Resources Advisory Committees and Resource Advisory Committee requirements, but Congress should allow the Forest Service and BLM to develop alternative public involvement models, submitted to the appropriate Congressional committees. The committees shall have not less than 90 days to consider these proposals. A submitted model may be disapproved by vote of either committee or by a joint letter by the Chair and Ranking Member of one or both of the committees.
8. Fee payment should be as convenient as possible to visitors. Use of commonly-used non-federal payment systems, such as EZ-Pass and PayPal, should be tested. Prepayment of entrance fees through inclusion in reservations for campsites, lodge rooms and other reserved services, and by sales in gateway communities, should also be encouraged.
9. Reauthorization of the federal recreation fee program should be for a minimum of six years and not more than ten years.
10. Fees collection by concessioners and third parties, including other governmental agencies and organizations which operate and maintain recreation services and facilities, should be authorized.
11. Fees for special recreation uses and events may be required but should not unreasonably deter legitimate uses of federal recreation sites nor discourage partnerships with third-party organizations.
12. Agencies that receive funds through FLREA are encouraged to fully utilize Public Lands Corps Act authority to complete FLREA-funded projects that meet FLREA objectives such as enhancing visitor services. Use of conservation corps on these projects is likely to deliver lowered costs and will provide jobs for local young people and veterans and connect younger Americans with the Great Outdoors.

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There are three additional issues we urge you to consider as you prepare FLREA to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

First, Americans gain little from great places that are invisible to them. And much of the Great Outdoors is not on the radar screens of younger, more urban and more diverse Americans. Greatly improved websites, use of social media and a redirected [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) can help us deal with federal site visitations that have lagged far behind population growth. For years, federal recreation programs have declined to partner with gateway communities, with concessioners and permittees and with others on outreach and promotion, perpetuating and exacerbating patterns favoring well known sites and peak periods. We are heartened by the participation of most major federal recreation providers in the IPW show which begins in Chicago tomorrow. We are heartened by the plans of the National Park Service to work with partners on a campaign linked to its Centennial to promote visitation. Yet we too often hear that advertising and promotion by federal land agencies are prohibited by law. We strongly disagree. The restrictions we see simply require notice to the Congress about use of appropriated funds for advertising – paying for ads. We see no prohibition on partner-based promotional activities designed to shift demand to lesser visited sites or to non-peak periods. And in fact we would appreciate this committee making it clear to the agencies that building awareness and promotion are legitimate uses of a portion of FLREA receipts. In the private sector, and even in some state parks, a percentage of gross receipts used for promotion is seen as vital. Perhaps a portion of overall [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) revenues should be earmarked for partner-based promotion efforts.

Second, we support providing senior Americans with special benefits associated with the Great Outdoors. We believe the current benefit of lifetime free access for a one-time fee of \$10, with an additional benefit of 50% reductions of campground and certain other fees, no longer represents the best use of deferred fees. This benefit effectively imposes excessive costs on others, including families with young children. We would support changes in the special benefits offered to seniors in one or more of the following ways:

- a. 50% discount of the annual America the Beautiful (ATB) Pass;
- b. Changing the age of eligibility for a senior pass to the age at which an individual is entitled to full Social Security benefits.
- c. Maintain the lifetime provision but at the higher cost: the current annual price of the America the Beautiful pass.

Third and finally, we support the annual free pass to America's active duty servicemen and servicewomen. They put their lives in harm's way to protect the values which are reflected in our Great Outdoors. This is now done under the discretionary authority of the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. We support codifying this and adding one more provision. We believe all recipients of a Purple Heart should qualify automatically for a lifetime disability pass. The costs associated with this provision will likely apply only to recent Mideast conflicts, since honorees for service in Vietnam and before are now virtually all eligible for lifetime senior passes. Approximately 50,000

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Purple Hearts have gone to those injured in the Persian Gulf War, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Any awardee with permanent injuries would be eligible for the existing free pass for any disabled American – this would simply eliminate the need to prove disability.

We believe these changes would be valuable, win/win components for revitalized federal recreation programs that succeed in providing benefits to all Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thank you for your interest and your actions to assist enjoyment of America's Great Outdoors. We urge rapid action on legislation to achieve the goal set forth in the title of the ***Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act***.

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Attachment