

**Testimony of Todd Davidson
On Behalf of
Western States Tourism Policy Council and Southeast Tourism Society
Before the
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
House Committee on Natural Resources
Regarding Amending the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act
April 4, 2014**

Good morning Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Subcommittee.

We appreciate this opportunity to discuss with you the importance of specifically including engagement with the travel and tourism sector in reauthorization of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) to allow the expertise and resources of states, local communities and underutilized federal agency resources to be fully leveraged to drive increased visitation and recreation opportunities.

I am Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon and am testifying today on behalf of the Western States Tourism Policy Council (WSTPC) and the Southeast Tourism Society (STS). Together we strongly endorse reauthorization of FLREA this year, and we can attest to its importance to the public lands in our states.

WSTPC is a consortium of eleven Western state tourism offices, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. Our members are appointed by governors and report to our state legislatures. WSTPC's creation was inspired by the 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism, which urged greater regional attention to the interrelationships between Federal lands, the environment and tourism. The mission of the WSTPC is to foster and encourage a positive environment for travel and tourism by serving as a forum to identify research, analyze, and advocate the travel and tourism related issues of public policy and opinion in the Western United States.

STS is a not-for-profit membership association that works to elevate the talents and strategies of travel and tourism organizations and individual professionals within its twelve state region. STS's mission is to strengthen the economic vitality of the region by uniting all segments of the travel and tourism industry through collaboration, education, advocacy, networking, and recognition. Established in 1983, STS is an engaged network of more than 800 members from twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Our organizations represent 23 states that are home to some of the America's most spectacular and iconic federal lands – well known to this Subcommittee. From Fort Hood National Forest and the Petrified Forest National Park to the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge and the Great Smokey Mountains National Park and many sites in between, federal lands, recreation, and conservation play a critical role in driving local economies and creating extraordinary travel

experiences. As organizations that represent communities across nearly half of the country, we support the reauthorization of FLREA and offer three proposals to better engage states and local communities, enhance visitor and recreation experiences and drive increased visitation, revenues, and economic impact.

Although management of federal lands is funded primarily by appropriations, a significant and growing portion of this management depends upon entrance and recreation fees. Revenues collected through FLREA enhance visitor experiences by providing funds to repair, maintain, and improve facilities; restore wildlife habitat for visitor recreation; offer educational materials and services; and provide law enforcement. For example, since FLREA enactment in 2005, the National Park Service, one of the authorized agencies, has obligated \$2.3 billion in fee revenues, which have funded over 9,800 projects and services with the National Park Service.

Cooperative Grants to Local Communities

We propose to have a portion of the fees designated for promotional cooperative efforts with tourism and community partners. At present, the National Park Service has a National Tourism Strategy and an Office of Tourism, providing an excellent model for how federal land management agencies can engage with local communities and the tourism sector. Each of the authorized agencies under FLREA has a dedicated tourism coordinator who participates in federal policy forums, such as the Tourism Policy Council, but these coordinators are underutilized as resources for frontline staff and local communities. In order to encourage greater engagement with local communities and provide opportunities for the parks to expand their outreach to user groups, we recommend that 1% of the national portion of entrance and recreation fees on sites that have fee revenue of more than \$500,000 annually be designated for the agency's office coordinating tourism activities. These funds would be deployed to create and distribute cooperative grants to local communities and individual sites. Cooperative grants will encourage collaboration between federal sites and local gateway communities to promote the sites and their activities ensuring that the messaging of federal sites has resonance and rewards engaged parks and sites with increased visitation, volunteerism, and spending. Gateway communities would see increased visitor spending and jobs.

Creating a manageable cooperative tourism grants program is an opportunity to connect federal policies with frontline tourism communities and businesses demonstrating that investments in federal lands are investments in local communities. By encouraging federal land management agencies to develop strategies for engaging with the travel and tourism sector and local communities, FLREA will be driving policies to ensure the economic impact of federal lands visitation and recreation are broadly shared by the states, communities, and small business.

Federal Lands Promotion

Additionally, we would like to see a provision included in FLREA reauthorization to specifically allow the fee revenues retained at the site to be used for cooperative promotional efforts with local communities. Many federal land managers perceive marketing and promotion as prohibited activities and are reluctant and or unwilling to discuss cooperative programs with destination marketing organizations. Not only is this a missed opportunity for sites to showcase

their attractions and programs, but it also means that they are failing to leverage the expertise of the tourism community in targeting and attracting key demographics, such as young people and Hispanic and African-American families and in driving visitation in non-peak periods. We recognize that federal land managers may have limited understanding of the fundamentals of marketing and promotion. We see this as an opportunity to put the talents and expertise of the travel and tourism sector to work for local federal lands in order to help them better achieve their visitation, outreach and programmatic goals.

Information Infrastructure

Effective utilization of technology is a challenge for organizations of all sizes and scope, including the federal land agencies. Rather than calling for a specific technology system and solutions, we would like to see the FLREA funds devoted to developing a technology infrastructure to drive private sector innovation that improves the visitor experience. We propose that the entrance and recreation fees sent to Washington be used to develop and maintain an electronic resource that compiles visitation and outdoor recreation data across all federal lands and waters for information, guides, amenities, and reservations into a common visitor-services platform.

Using Recreation.gov as a model for cross-agency collaboration, the visitor-services platform would encourage and enhance tourism and recreation on federal sites, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of federal agency operations, enrich the visitor experience for a diverse set of audiences, and create opportunities for private sector collaboration. States and local destination marketing organizations and business would be able to access the data to target their promotional efforts and, working collaboratively, the private sector would be able to develop applications and other tools to better utilize and enhance visitor and recreation programs at the local, regional or national level. One-size-fits-all-solutions won't work for the technology challenges faced by federal land agencies, but a single resource can drive the targeted solutions that work for the diverse array of federal lands and communities.

Conclusion

These three proposals aim to strengthen FLREA from the perspective of the federal land management agencies and from the vantage point of local user groups, including the often overlooked gateway communities. These proposals are meant to encourage and enhance visitation and outdoor recreation and to create opportunities for collaboration with states, local communities and the private sector. We stand ready to work with you to advance a FLREA reauthorization that works for all of our federal lands stakeholders.