

Statement of Congressman Thomas M. Reynolds

Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks

Hearing on H.R. 5452, the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to read for you a letter I received from a veteran who resides in my home district:

I am a 76 year old, Korean War Veteran. I've lived in New York all of my life, with 51 years of it on Woodruff Street in Silver Springs [New York].

This morning, Veterans Day, I went to Letchworth State Park, which is 8 miles from my home to go for a walk as I do quite often. I was not allowed to drive my car into the Park unless I paid \$6 at the gate. This must be one of the benefits on Veterans Day.

[Signed] Robert Kupp

While this letter addressed a state park, it made me wonder why doesn't the National Park Service, and other federal land management agencies, provide easier access to our veterans? Our veterans are deserving of certain benefits, including simpler access to our federal park land. This is why I introduced the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act.

The Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act would make a new discounted category for the Golden Eagle Passport for veterans. The Golden Eagle Passport program provides an access card waiving the entrance fee at federal public lands managed by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. The card may be purchased for \$65 and is good for one year to waive the entrance fee at national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests and other federally managed public lands.

My legislation will make the Golden Eagle Passport available to veterans that were separated from their service under conditions other than dishonorable for \$10, and it will be good for one year. As proof of their eligibility for the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass, veterans will need to show their official separation papers, commonly referred to as the DD-214 among the military. It is the simplest means of identifying a veteran. Federal parks personnel can be easily instructed on how to read the document and determine eligibility.

Offering such a discount to veterans is the right thing to do to allow the men and women who have served in uniform greater access to the very land that they have defended. This new passport category will offer countless outlets for recreational and healthy outdoor activities, which is especially important for our new veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Just by walking through the parks, our veterans will be exposed to history, science, and the benefits of the outdoors.

Also, this proposal is supported by the American Legion, AMVETS, and Veterans of Foreign Wars, and as well as a growing number of cosponsors -- several of which serve on this committee. Many of our colleagues in Congress and on this very panel, and other veterans service organizations agree this legislation is a fitting offer to our veterans so they may have easier access to America's great public lands like Joshua Tree National Park in California, Isle Royale National Park in Michigan, Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee, Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site -- which is near my home in Buffalo, New York -- and literally hundreds more federal public lands that charge an entrance fee.

Lastly, as a result of my introduction of the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act, the Departments of Agriculture and Interior have made a momentous decision. A little later during this hearing, a witness from the National Park Service will testify and announce that the departments sympathize with the goals of this legislation, and that the secretaries of the departments will allow veterans access to all federal public lands free of charge on each Veterans Day. I appreciate the discussion that the introduction of this bill has evoked with the departments and particularly with the National Park Service.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for your time to tell you and the committee about the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass. I would also like to express my gratitude to the National Parks Service for their help in ensuring a small, but very meaningful honor to the brave men and women who have served in our nation's military.