

STATEMENT OF
LESLIE WELDON, DEPUTY CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM,
FOREST SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

REGARDING
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FEE AUTHORITY ON FEDERAL LANDS
APRIL 4, 2014

Chairman Bishop and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the implementation of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service. I am Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, Forest Service, testifying today on behalf of USDA.

USDA appreciates the efforts of this Congress to extend REA for an additional year in last October's continuing resolution. This extension has allowed the agency to proceed with normal operations without any impact on the public or our partners. It has also allowed time to continue valuable discussions concerning the recreation fee authority on federal lands and identify a way to continue to deliver important recreation services to the public.

REA AND RECREATION

The authorities in REA allow us to improve recreational facilities and services and provide quality visitor experiences across National Forest System (NFS) lands. These authorities enable the Forest Service to invest in upkeep and improvements at recreation sites that visitors use and enjoy. Through our collective mission with the U.S. Department of the Interior, we provide the American public and visitors from around the world with outstanding recreation opportunities on federal lands. Since the enactment of REA in December 2004, we have made tremendous progress in accomplishing our mission.

Recreation fees play a critical role in our ability to ensure that outdoor recreation opportunities remain available, accessible, and sustainable, so that current and future generations of Americans may continue to enjoy these places of remarkable natural beauty and rich American heritage.

Recreation on NFS lands contributes about \$13.6 billion to the nation's gross domestic product each year and supports approximately 205,000 jobs. Many of these jobs are located in rural communities and are associated with numerous outdoor industries and small businesses. One dollar invested in recreation programs yields approximately \$46 dollars to the nation's GDP, and NFS lands support over 5,000 outfitting and guiding operations authorized under REA, many of which are small businesses employing local citizens.

SUSTAINABLE RECREATION

The Forest Service manages these recreation opportunities in a sustainable manner through appropriated funds, partnerships, alliances, volunteers, and fee retention. The authority to retain

and spend recreation fees under REA is critical to the sustainability of the Forest Service's national recreation program. Under REA, at least 80 percent and up to 95 percent of recreation fee revenues must be spent at the sites where they were collected. In addition, REA enables agencies to partner with user groups, small businesses, and industries to ensure sustainable recreation practices involving a variety of resources, settings, and activities, including guided hikes, hunting trips, off-road tours, sport fishing, kayaking, and canoeing.

Fee retention authority is a critical tool that forest managers use to develop, maintain, service, and protect high-priority and heavily used recreation sites and visitor centers that are enjoyed by millions. Often located near urban centers, small towns, and rural communities, these heavily used sites have become our nation's backyard for outdoor experiences. Over 240 million Americans live within 100 miles of a National Forest or Grassland. These recreational sites introduce millions of Americans to the natural splendors that surround them.

Recreation fee revenue generated under REA constitutes about 20 to 25 percent of the recreation budget. Recreation fees have made a huge difference in the Forest Service's ability to improve sites and repair deteriorating facilities. Investments are made in some of our most heavily used recreation sites to enhance public services, provide health and safety benefits, and mitigate impacts on cultural and natural resources. However, the revenues generated under REA do not fully cover the cost of maintaining and servicing these sites. Appropriated dollars, volunteers, and partnerships with outfitters and guides are also used to cover costs, leverage assistance, and provide in-kind services and value. Retention of permit fees under REA also helps support

administration of permits for commercial recreational activities like outfitting and guiding and competitive events.

RECREATION FEE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

As important as REA is to the agencies testifying before you today, it is only one piece of a much larger recreation strategy. I would like to clarify REA's role in Forest Service management of recreation opportunities on federal lands.

The vast majority of recreation opportunities on NFS lands is free to the public and offers a suite of high-quality experiences. Approximately 98 percent of NFS lands, providing recreation opportunities ranging from camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, and much more, is available to the public free of charge. There are more than 20,000 developed recreation sites on NFS lands. Of those 20,000 sites, approximately 4,000 are subject to recreation fees under REA, and approximately 2,000 are concession campgrounds that are subject to fees charged under another authority. Most of these 6,000 fee sites are campgrounds and cabin rentals, but they also include developed boat launches, picnic sites, off-road vehicle staging areas, developed swimming areas, developed recreation sites at trailheads, and target ranges.

There are approximately 6,000 trailheads in the National Forests that lead to nearly 160,000 miles of trails. While maintenance of trails can be costly, most trailheads the Forest Service manages, about 85 percent, are not subject to any fees despite substantial investment in these sites. Fees may be charged only when a site has the amenities required under REA. These

amenities are provided to meet public need and convenience, address public health and safety concerns, and protect sensitive natural and cultural resources.

The ability to retain fees locally is beneficial to both the American taxpayer and to the recreation user. When a recreation user agrees to share in the cost of managing our most heavily used facilities and services by paying a fee, it not only helps create a stewardship ethic, but also reduces the burden on taxpayers to maintain these sites. Recreation fees also give Forest Service managers more flexibility with regard to expenditure of appropriated dollars to manage the vast majority of NFS lands at no additional cost to the public.

Finally, the Forest Service is seeing increased use at our developed sites. Data from over 70 National Forests collected in a recent National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey show that the number of visits to campgrounds rose by more than 2.5 million from 2005 to 2012.

ACCOUNTABILITY

USDA is committed to working with this committee, National Forest visitors, and the American public to ensure transparency and accountability in operation and management of the recreation fee program. Since enactment of REA, the Forest Service has developed numerous tools to assist National Forests in implementing the statute, including standardized signage, fee proposal tools and templates, national reporting tools, financial tools, and training to ensure funds are tracked and spent in accordance with REA. Local Forest Service managers evaluate how to spend recreation fee revenue site by site, depending on the condition of facilities and public needs and desires.

In 2011 the Forest Service started reviewing all recreation fee proposals at the national level. National review enhances consistency of recreation fee proposals with regard to public involvement, establishment of specific types of fees, and other aspects of implementation. This represents a few of the changes the Forest Service has implemented to ensure compliance with REA.

The Forest Service also began implementing a point of sale (POS) system in 2011, which enhances customer service and convenience by allowing use of credit cards. The POS system will increase internal efficiency and the agency's ability to track collection of recreation fee revenues. The POS system is being implemented in phases, beginning with vendor sites that handle the highest volume of collections.

COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT BILL

The Forest Service has had the opportunity to review the draft bill. The draft bill revises the existing terminology and conditions under which the U.S. Forest Service and all other agencies collect fees. The draft bill modifies the public input and participation process in the agencies' establishment of fees. It provides for additional types of America the Beautiful —the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes or Interagency Passes. The draft bill outlines a different approach to expenditure and reporting requirements for agencies while eliminating the triennial reporting process. Finally, we note the draft bill includes a five-year sunset date.

USDA would like to work with the Chairman and the Subcommittee on this legislation once the bill is introduced.

We would appreciate further discussion on retaining a national recreation reservation system for all REA agencies. The Forest Service would also like to work with the Committee to make it feasible for concessioners to accept passes. Finally, we recommend that Congress permanently authorize this program,. Permanent authority provides stability for the public and enables managers to implement long projects and enter into partnerships with outfitters, vendors, and communities who benefit from the program economically.

CONCLUSION

Reauthorization of REA is critical to the Forest Service's national recreation program. REA has enabled the agency to provide consistently excellent recreation experiences at sites across the United States. REA has strengthened the connection between visitors and the lands they cherish by requiring that the fees they pay benefit the sites where they were collected. Thousands of projects, large and small, have been supported by REA fees since 2004. Visitors consistently comment that they are willing to pay reasonable recreation fees if they know the money will be used to improve the sites they are visiting.

REA facilitates efficiency, consistency, and good customer service by enabling interagency cooperation and public participation. The agencies strive to manage visitor contributions effectively, efficiently, and in an open and collaborative manner. The administrative and policy changes the Forest Service has introduced since 2004 demonstrate the agency's commitment to improve the recreation fee program, both in terms of customer service and good governance.

The Forest Service plans projects funded by recreation fees years in advance. Administration of the recreation fee program requires significant up-front investment to implement customer service enhancements and to ensure that the Interagency Pass is designed, produced, and distributed on schedule. The agencies work for years to develop mutually beneficial relationships with public and private sector partners at the local and national levels.

Reauthorization of REA before it expires on December 8, 2015, would allow the program to continue in a cost-effective manner and without disruption of visitor services.

We look forward to working with the subcommittee and our sister agencies on developing permanent recreation fee authority. As part of that effort, we hope to enhance REA based on our experience implementing the statute, for example, by more effectively addressing public involvement and authority for amenity fees and by providing for a veterans pass.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Forest Service's implementation of REA and its critical importance to sustainable recreation opportunities on federal lands. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
REGARDING
H.R. 3976 “Wounded Veterans Recreation Act”
APRIL 4, 2014

Chairman Bishop and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 3976, the “Wounded Veterans Recreation Act.” I am Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, Forest Service, testifying today on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

USDA supports the intent of H.R. 3976 to honor the service of our veterans.

H.R. 3976 would extend lifetime Federal Recreation Land Passes, also known as Interagency Passes, to any veteran with a service-connected disability as defined in section 101 of title 38, United States Code. The Department understands and shares the Committee’s desire to honor the service of our veterans, particularly those individuals who suffer injury or illness as a result

of their service. We ask for an opportunity to work with the Committee staff and the Department of Veteran Affairs to address a number of logistical, cost and other issues associated with effective implementation.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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H.R. 2743 “Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act”
APRIL 4, 2014

Chairman Bishop and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 2743, the “Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act.” I am Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System for the Forest Service, testifying today on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

USDA supports the intent of H.R. 2743 to honor the service of our veterans.

H.R. 2743 would provide for a Veterans Eagle Parks Pass that would be available to any veteran who has separated from military service under conditions other than dishonorable, if the veteran provides proof of that status by presenting a DD214. That pass shall be valid for the life of the

veteran for whom it was purchased. The Department understands and shares the Committee's desire to honor the service of our veterans.

We ask for an opportunity to work with the Committee staff and the Department of Veteran Affairs to address a number of logistical, cost and other issues associated with effective implementation.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.