

STATEMENT OF JOHN WESSELS, ACTING ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, BUSINESS SERVICES,
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON NATIONAL PARKS, OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 5452, TO
MAKE THE NATIONAL PARKS AND FEDERAL RECREATIONAL LANDS PASS AVAILABLE AT A
DISCOUNT TO CERTAIN VETERANS.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 5452, the proposed Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act. The legislation would require the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to make the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available at a cost of \$10 to any veteran separated from military service under conditions other than dishonorable.

In the 108 th Congress, Congress enacted the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Public Law 108-447) (REA), a major overhaul of the fee system that governs the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Forest System, certain public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and recreational lands administered by the Bureau of Reclamation.

Our federal lands provide Americans and visitors from around the world special places for recreation, education, reflection, and solace. Public lands managed by the Department of the Interior hosted over 370 million recreation visits in 2005. Ensuring that the federal lands continue to play this important role in American life and culture requires that we maintain visitor facilities and services and enhance visitor opportunities. Such efforts require a source of funding with which we can quickly respond to increases in visitor demand. Recreation fee revenues are a critical source of such supplemental funding that significantly enhance our efforts to address the deferred maintenance backlog at our National Parks and better manage other federal lands, and this bill could reduce the funds available for these purposes significantly.

REA established a new multi-agency America the Beautiful-National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass (the new Pass) to cover entrance fees for NPS and FWS and standard amenity recreation fees for BLM, Forest Service, and BOR, generally for a period of 12 months. The target rollout of the new Pass is scheduled for January 2007, and the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture are working diligently to ensure we meet that goal through a transparent and thoughtful implementation process.

During Congressional consideration of the establishment of this pass, thought was given as to classes of people that might be eligible for discounted passes. At one time, legislation was introduced to provide free passes to all September 11, 2001 responders and their families. Firefighters, law enforcement officers, and teachers have all been suggested as potential groups that should be considered for discounts. However, a decision was made ultimately by Congress to offer a discounted pass to senior citizens and a free lifetime pass to U.S. citizens or persons who permanently reside in the United States and who have a medical determination and documentation of blindness or permanent disability, including disabled veterans. We agree with this approach.

The Department of the Interior recognizes the contribution that veterans have made to this country's history and present. The National Park System includes many units that honor the service of our nation's veterans. All of the memorials within the District of Columbia plus the USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii charge no fees as required by law.

Congressman Reynolds introduced H.R. 5452, according to a press release from his office, after he received a letter from a Korean War veteran who was required to pay an admission fee for entrance to a park on Veterans Day. Mr. Reynolds felt this was unacceptable and we agree. Beginning with November 11, 2006, it is the policy of the Department of the Interior that all veterans and their accompanying family members will be admitted free to sites that charge entrance or standard amenity fees, managed by this Department, on Veterans Day each year. We understand the Secretary of Agriculture is adopting a similar policy with regard to fee sites managed by the U.S. Forest Service. We believe this is an appropriate way to honor our veterans without creating a precedent for carving out exceptions to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which was carefully developed to provide a comprehensive approach to fee management.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.