

**STATEMENT OF STEVE WHITESELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, REGARDING EXPANDING ACCESS TO FEDERAL LANDS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.**

**JULY 24, 2008**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the status of expanding access to federal lands for people with disabilities in the National Park System. We are pleased to discuss the status of the National Park Service (NPS) Accessibility Management Program, the goals and objectives of our program, the accomplishments that we have made over the past several years, and the initiatives that we have underway to ensure continued success going forward. My statement will also highlight some ongoing efforts to expand access for people with disabilities by our sister agencies within the Department of the Interior.

**Introduction and Background**

On May 11, 2006, we were pleased to be able to participate in a hearing before this subcommittee to discuss the status of our efforts to address accessibility for individuals with disabilities in the National Park System. At that hearing, we highlighted Director's Order #42, entitled Accessibility for Visitors with Disabilities in National Park Service Programs and Services. The order directs the NPS to provide the highest level of access practicable, "while ensuring consistency with our other legal mandates for conservation and protection of the resources we manage." We believe that the essence of this goal is to ensure that the Nation's 54 million citizens with disabilities have the same opportunities to visit and experience the wonders of the National Park System that is afforded to all other citizens.

Over the past several years, the NPS has charged each superintendent with evaluating their facilities and programs to determine the level of access and to take actions on an annual basis, utilizing appropriated funds, fee revenues and other funds available to the parks to make required modifications. We have also established an extensive program to provide technical assistance and continuing education in order to assist the park staff in better understanding the legal requirements, and the methods and techniques for ensuring that corrections are made appropriately. Under this approach, every park in the National Park System has made progress in identifying and correcting deficiencies. Despite significant progress, the NPS recognizes that a number of opportunities exist to build upon these recent achievements.

**Accomplishments over the Past Two Years**

Since the previous hearing in May 2006, we have continued our efforts to improve access and have made significant advances. We are pleased to provide a brief summary of our major accomplishments since that time.

First, in an effort to increase awareness of the importance of accessibility throughout the NPS, the Director issued a memorandum to all parks and park staff on October 24, 2006 concerning disability access in the NPS. That memorandum informed the staff of the outcome of the congressional hearing, reminded the staff of our legal obligations and policy directions, and outlined specific directions for continued progress. Those directions included: ensuring that all newly constructed assets are designed and constructed in compliance with the appropriate standards or guidelines; ensuring that all rehabilitation and renovation projects incorporate accessibility corrections to the highest degree practicable; ensuring that all interpretive programs, services and opportunities are provided in such a way as to make them accessible to all individuals with disabilities; and ensuring that appropriate staff receives the necessary continuing education and technical assistance to enable them to better meet the needs of citizens with disabilities.

Second, in an effort to increase awareness among park managers, the NPS planned and delivered a satellite broadcast training program directed at superintendents, division chiefs and other park managers. The program was entitled “The Status of Disability Access in the NPS: From Rhetoric to Reality”. Led by the Deputy Director of the NPS, the program focused on the legal requirements for access, the standards that must be followed, and areas for improvement. Over 200 people from over 150 parks participated in the program.

Third, following the hearing in 2006, the NPS conducted a survey of the major audiovisual programs that were already in existence in the parks to determine how many were not currently captioned for visitors who are deaf; how many were not audio-described for visitors with visual limitations; and how many theaters did not have assistive-listening devices for visitors with hearing loss. Based on the results of the survey, the NPS initiated the Audio-Visual Initiative for Visitors with Disabilities, allocating fee revenue funds for the correction of these deficiencies. As a result, the NPS recently released approximately \$3 million of fee revenue funds to add the listed components to over 100 currently used programs in over 85 different park units. Additional projects have been identified and will be funded in FY 2009 and beyond.

Fourth, the NPS has been working to develop a strategy for evaluating all assets with regard to conformance with established accessibility guidelines and standards and identifying corrective actions that should be taken to bring the assets into compliance. This strategy includes the development of a comprehensive accessibility survey instrument, an accessibility cost estimating program, directions for completing the evaluations, and the use of fee revenue funds to initiate selected evaluations in order to establish a baseline for better understanding the accessibility program needs for the NPS. Those evaluations are underway and will continue over the next few years.

Fifth, the NPS continues to work closely with the National Center on Accessibility (NCA) at Indiana University, under a long-term cooperative agreement, in order to provide technical assistance and continuing education services in making the parks and their programs as accessible as is practicable. This training is necessary in order to create knowledge and awareness of the legal requirements for accessibility, including the regulations, guidelines and standards that must be followed, as well as introducing best practices in improving access. Over

the past two years, the NCA has conducted eight separate training courses that have reached over 300 members of the NPS staff. These courses have been targeted for park managers, facility managers, architects and designers, interpreters, and contractors to the NPS. In addition to the training courses, the NCA staff is actively involved in assisting the parks in conducting accessibility evaluations, identifying deficiencies, and outlining recommended actions for correcting the deficiencies.

Sixth, the NPS has a centralized group of professionals located at the Denver Service Center (DSC) in Colorado who oversee the design and construction of most major new projects as well as major renovations to existing facilities. This team supports the line-item construction and Fee Demonstration Programs by providing architectural/engineering management, design, technical review, technical support and quality assurance services for a wide variety of new, existing and historic structures. The DSC has quality assurance staff that is responsible for reviewing all projects that are managed by DSC to ensure that compliance with accessibility standards are included at the four stages of design. They also have developed Contractor Quality Control Specifications to be utilized in construction supervision. As part of these specifications, the group has developed an Accessibility Inspection Report that must be utilized by construction supervisors in all projects under the control of the Center.

Seventh, the NPS also operates the Harpers Ferry Center (HFC) in West Virginia which oversees a wide range of activities to assist NPS field interpreters. These tools include audiovisual programs, historic furnishings, museum exhibits, publications, and wayside exhibits. HFC has also worked with other units throughout the NPS to make interpretive programs and media more accessible to visitors with disabilities. The NPS published “Programmatic Accessibility Guidelines for National Park Service Interpretive Media.” The guidelines help parks ensure accessibility in programs and in writing media contracts. The Harpers Ferry Center for Media Services, as a NPS agency, has created a public webpage to help parks, contractors, and other agencies create accessible media. This site includes downloadable guidelines, podcasts, FAQs, and links to legal information and training opportunities. The NPS also created specifications and templates for large-print brochures.

Finally, the NPS recently launched a new website, “National Parks: Accessible to Everyone” that provides information to aid visitors with disabilities and special needs to find accessible trails, programs, activities, and other features at national park units nationwide. We will continue to update this site as more and more park facilities and programs are improved to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

### **Examples of Projects to Improve Access**

The best measure of our accomplishments however, is the degree to which each park is implementing the directions on a consistent and ongoing basis. Several years ago, NPS established a National Accessibility Achievement Award Program. The program was created by the NPS to stimulate and reward creative thinking and original program/project activity among NPS personnel that results in greater opportunity for persons with disabilities throughout the National Park System, and results in enabling the NPS to better conform to servicewide goals

and policies. The following examples are just a few of the innovative and creative accomplishments that have been recognized through this program.

Denali National Park and Preserve, historically referred to by staff and visitors alike as the “trail-less wilderness” park, has evolved over the past 10 years to become the “accessible wilderness” park. The park and its partners, including the park concessionaire, and the Alaska Railroad invested over \$34 million in constructing a new visitor center campus at park headquarters. The entire campus is fully accessible and all of the principle visitor facilities are clustered in close proximity to each other so that visitors can travel between them with ease. The Alaska Railroad Depot where almost 65 percent of visitors arrive and depart the park was rehabilitated, and linked to the new visitor center campus by paved walkways. The new award winning Denali Visitor Center, the Morino Grill and the Denali Bookstore sit next to each other at the center of the campus linked by short accessible paved pathways. The new Murie Science and Learning Center, and the employee dining hall are just across the parking lot, and they too are fully accessible. The interpretive exhibits in the visitor center are scattered along the campus walkways to help visitors learn about what they are seeing, and to guide them to their desired locations and are all designed and installed to appropriate standards. The new high-definition park interpretive film, showing twice per hour in the visitor center is captioned, and incorporates assisted listening and audio description.

In 2006, the Friends of Historic Great Falls Tavern in Maryland, a Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park partner, raised \$535,000 for the design and purchase of a new replica canal boat to be used in the park interpretive story. The design effort required the Friends to collaborate with park staff and boat builders to design a replica canal boat that was historically accurate, but also made accommodations for those with mobility and hearing limitations. Related to this effort, was the new universally accessible design canal boat that addressed the needs of visitors with mobility limitations by including easy access to the entry level, an incline lift to provide access for wheelchair users to the upper deck, and accessible restroom facilities. It also addressed the needs of individuals with hearing limitations by the installation of a state-of-the-art sound system that distributes high-quality sound equally to all areas of the boat. A current project includes the installation of assistive listening devices. It is estimated that the new design with the accessibility features will enable an additional 2,000 individuals with mobility limitations per year to participate in this experience. This includes those who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices, but also senior citizens, parents with babies in strollers, and those with more invisible mobility limitations such as cardiac and respiratory problems.

In 2003, the staff of Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina began working with a Harpers Ferry Design Team in the planning and design of new exhibits for the 2,250-square-foot exhibit area. One simple goal of the exhibit was to make the experience accessible to and usable to everyone. The park staff insisted that special attention be given to incorporating features for individuals with mobility, visual and hearing limitations in the most seamless and unobtrusive way possible rather than providing separate or special experiences. Some of the specific elements of the exhibit are:

- Audio elements are included at each exhibit to provide information. They offer audio description for visitors who are visually limited. In addition, all video components

are open-captioned, and all audio-only components have flat screen monitors that provide open captions.

- Tactile elements, including touchable reproduction “Ferguson rifles” are provided to allow a “hands on” experience for all visitors.
- Large-scale tactile models of trees recreate the look of a long-lost virgin forest that was an important aspect of the battle. Lighting was carefully designed to create the dappled light of a forest, yet to provide sufficient illumination on text and displays.

Over the past several years, Booker T. Washington National Monument in Virginia has made accessibility a keystone of the park’s ongoing mission to visitors and staff. In the last ten years, many park-wide accessibility improvements have been made to visitor and employee facilities and services. Updated accessible visitor and employee facilities include a new parking lot which was completely redesigned to provide a circular flow of traffic allowing for curb-free drop off and curb-free route from all parking spaces to the visitor center. The visitor center entrance/exit doors have been retrofitted with automatic openers. A new universally accessible restroom building has been built replacing very small, minimally accessible restrooms. Most visitor center functions for visitors and employees have been made accessible. New tactile exhibits have been added and the visitor desk was redesigned. The orientation film has been captioned for visitors with hearing loss and a new interactive touch screen program meets the latest standards for accessibility. It has both audio and video for persons with hearing or visual limitations.

### **DOI Response to the U.S. Access Board Proposed Rule on Outdoor Developed Areas**

In response to the U.S. Access Board Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) for accessibility guidelines for outdoor developed areas, the Department of the Interior (DOI) requested its bureaus to review the NPRM and provide comments. Comments were received from the NPS, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

In general, all of the DOI agencies were very supportive of the recommendations made in the proposed rule. DOI had been very actively involved in the Regulatory Negotiating Committee that developed the majority of the proposed rule, and each bureau has been utilizing the recommendations from the report as guidance for the design and construction of accessible trails, campgrounds, and picnic areas for the past several years. We believe that the guidelines provide excellent information regarding the design and construction of these facilities while at the same time providing guidance for balancing access with the preservation and protection of the resources that we manage.

We recommended that the final rule should be reviewed for consistency with the original Regulatory Negotiating Committee report, and should be reviewed for greater clarity and ease of understanding on the part of the eventual user. We also strongly encourage the Access Board to expedite the completion of the final rule. We believe that adoption of the final guidelines and their incorporation into officially enforceable standards will assist all of our bureaus and our

contractors in being more consistent in the design and construction of accessible outdoor developed facilities.

### **Other activities within DOI**

In addition to the NPS, other bureaus within DOI have accessibility programs in place and have undertaken initiatives to improve access by people with disabilities to federal lands.

#### U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) policy requires that the design and construction of new facilities comply with applicable accessibility requirements and guidelines, including those related to the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Architectural Barriers Act. Under Service policy, proposed projects that have accessibility, public safety, and other critical issues require review and approval by a FWS Regional Engineer before procurement of construction materials and services can occur. These policies apply both to large and small construction projects, such as visitor centers and boardwalks. The following are a few examples that illustrate FWS' commitment to improving accessibility to FWS managed facilities and trails:

- The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act authorizes FWS to collect fees at national wildlife refuges to enhance visitor programs. Many projects funded through the recreation fee program are designed to provide accessible parking areas, sidewalks, boardwalks, interpretive displays and signs. Often, this funding is supplemented by contributions from National Wildlife Refuge Friends organizations, Youth Conservation Corps crews, volunteers, and local communities to meet visitor needs.
- Another important contributor to building accessible facilities is FWS' Visitor Facility Enhancement construction program, which funds small scale outdoor projects such as accessible boardwalks, fishing piers, hunting blinds, and kiosks that allow visitors to get closer to our natural world. Since the program's inception in 2003, hundreds of accessible visitor facility enhancement projects have been completed. Each year, we consider accessibility as a major factor in selecting new projects to fund.
- Several Federal Highway Administration funding programs also offer opportunities to design and build new accessible FWS facilities. One example is the Refuge Roads program which provides funding each year to enhance our trail system – improving accessibility is one of several priority factors used to rank projects for funding. Through employee training programs and facility reviews, the Service strongly encourages the use of the Universal Trails Assessment Process (UTAP) for its visitor services staff dealing with trails. The UTAP was used to inventory and assess the condition of 1400 miles of trails during the past several years.
- FWS is also in the process of updating its Visitor Services Handbook which will offer field stations guidance on how to review and improve their visitor programs and facilities. The new Handbook will include accessibility guidance, a checklist, and references for managers and staff to use when conducting field station assessments, completing comprehensive conservation plans, and planning new facilities.

- FWS has also been involved with the Federal Land Management Agency Working Group assembled by the U.S. Access Board to offer advice and technical assistance on developing rulemaking that applies to outdoor developed areas.
- The National Fish Hatchery System has at least three facilities in PA, NV and WA that are currently being renovated to improve accessibility in a fish culture building and in visitor centers and visitor center restrooms. FWS is providing approximately \$137,000 to complete the projects. Two of these projects are being implemented using Visitor Facility Enhancement funding that the National Fish Hatchery System received for the first time in 2008.

### The Bureau of Land Management

Toward the goal of ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and facilities, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted comprehensive accessibility evaluations of its recreation facilities for the past several years. More than \$3 million have been spent over those years to implement more than 100 Accessibility Corrective Action Projects at the BLM's developed recreation sites, contact stations, and all 18 visitor centers. In addition, all new construction or renovation projects follow the principles of universal design to ensure accessibility for all users.

Projects to reach all audiences have included closed captioning of interpretive videos, remote-viewing stations, raised letter interpretive signs, tactile displays, and wheelchair accessible toilets, picnic sites, counters, ramps, trails, and boat takeout areas. Specific examples of these efforts by BLM include:

- Through an innovative public-private partnership, the award winning Cascade Streamwatch project at the Wildwood Recreation Area just outside Portland, Oregon features a fully accessible viewing chamber actually built within the stream. The chamber presents a rare opportunity for everyone to view fish and waterfowl up close and personal. The project also includes accessible picnic areas and an extensive system of accessible interpretive trails and boardwalks with tactile models of fish.
- The Anasazi Heritage Center in Colorado is fully accessible with a ramped entry, access into the lowered museum pithouse exhibit via wheelchair lift, lowered information counter, and accessible walkways and restrooms. The museum films are captioned, Discovery Drawers are available with touchable artifacts, and exhibits include a large, topographic relief map of southwest Colorado. Innovative interactive computer exhibits offer alternative forms of access to Pueblos located at nearby Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. Accessible trails with interpretive signs also provide access to two 12<sup>th</sup> century villages.
- The BLM Moab, Utah Field Office completed a project to make Takeout Beach on the Colorado River more accessible to disabled boaters. The newly installed accessible walkway system, shelter, toilets, and loading area greatly facilitate exiting the river by

persons of all abilities. A local group of boaters with disabilities, “S’PLORE,” volunteered many hours of assistance on this project.

- Pompey’s Pillar National Monument Interpretive Center in Montana accommodates visitors with mobility impairments by using a camera which zooms to Captain William Clark’s (Lewis and Clark Expedition) original signature on the 150-foot sandstone face of the Pillar, as well as a tactile replica of the signature. The exhibits were all designed with universal accessibility in mind, including sound sticks for visually impaired visitors. The center and exhibits are also physically accessible, including low retail and information counters.

### The Bureau of Reclamation

The Bureau of Reclamation has been working both internally and with our recreation managing partners to make priority recreation sites accessible since 1988. Accomplishments by Reclamation vary according to the sites available, extent of public uses, and the financial resources available to the agency and our Managing Partners. At the programmatic level, Reclamation currently is updating our Recreation Facilities Manual and accessibility requirements are being incorporated into the new edition. Recreation site designs continue to incorporate accessibility requirements.

The following is a summary of a few highlight activities from throughout Reclamation’s five regions:

- Great Plains Region activities include completing site evaluations and constructing new or retrofitting existing facilities, including comfort stations, campsites, day use sites, and fishing and courtesy docks, to ensure compliance with accessibility guidelines. By 2010, the Great Plains Region will have expended \$19,664,000 with Managing Partner contributions of \$7,225,000 on all accessibility actions. In 2008, the Great Plains Region and our Managing Partner completed construction of an accessible Nature Center at our Norman Project in Oklahoma.
- In the Lower Colorado Region overlook and Pedestrian Plaza, part of a major project near Hoover Dam on the Arizona-Nevada border. The Nevada Overlook is adjacent to the abutment for the new bridge that is being constructed over the Colorado River. The bridge is approximately 500' downstream from the Dam, and several hundred feet above the Dam and existing crossing. Many accessible features are incorporated into this construction, including the walkway that you can see zigzagging to the bridge, restrooms, and the pedestrian plaza itself. The walkway has been cut into the rock at the 5% grade.
- For the general public, we are looking at ADA accessible trails and ADA interpretive signage at several sites in the Mid-Pacific Region for a variety of disabilities such as wheelchair, visual, hearing, etc. Each disability requires a different approach to resolve the challenges. ADA projects involve: visitor centers, entrance kiosks, restrooms and showers, camping sites, picnic areas, trails, interpretive and educational signage, RV

dump stations, water and electrical hookups, floating restrooms, fishing docks, boat launch ramps and docks, marina and boat storage facilities.

- In the Pacific Northwest Region Grand Coulee Visitor Center, Grand Coulee Dam, Washington: In 2006, Grand Coulee opened a newly renovated building, for their visitor center, to remove all barriers within the structure and program. The displays were designed to provide many colors, large print, and hands on activities to provide accessibility for all. Also, listening devices are available that describe each display and guides you throughout the facility so the folks that are visually impaired or blind can enjoy each exhibit. Amplification devices are available for the hearing impaired. At the front desk are brochures that have been transcribed into Braille and large print. The laser light show is an incredible show and very popular attraction so it has also been audio described and is offered on the IPod.
- Through partnerships with BOR and non-Federal public entities in Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah, in the Upper Colorado Region accessibility improvements throughout the area are being accomplished. In Colorado River Wildlife Area for example, BOR is replacing and relocating benches to provide for better access and companion wheelchair seating/transfer. A physical and visual barrier has been placed at a safety hazard on the east end of the North Shore accessible route (excessive slope and water hazard). Additional efforts include concrete shaving to eliminate barriers and tripping hazards along accessible route, installation of a secondary fee tube for accessibility purposes and installation of appropriate signage at accessible parking spaces.

## **Conclusion**

The Department is dedicated to providing the highest level of access that is practical, and is in conformance with the appropriate legal mandates and servicewide policy. It is the responsibility of all of our park superintendents to identify barriers that limit full accessibility, and to take actions to eliminate those barriers. Over the past several years, with the help of our staff, superintendents, consultants, and partners, we have made a great deal of progress toward enhancing the quality of our accessibility program. In spite of the issues that make access improvements difficult, and despite the fact that some inconsistency still exists, the individual parks are continuing to make progress on a park-by-park basis.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. This concludes my prepared remarks and I would be glad to answer any questions that you or the members of the subcommittee may have.