

**STATEMENT OF PAMELA K. HAZE  
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR  
BUDGET, FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND ACQUISITION  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION  
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
ON  
H.R. \_\_, TO AMEND THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT  
H.R. 3976, THE WOUNDED VETERANS RECREATION ACT  
H.R.2743, THE VETERANS EAGLE PARKS PASS ACT  
APRIL 4, 2014**

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to appear before you today to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. \_\_, draft legislation that would amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), and on H.R. 2743 and H.R. 3976, bills that would authorize special passes for certain veterans to national parks and other federal recreation lands.

As an initial matter, we appreciate that Congress enacted, as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-46), a one-year extension of FLREA, until December 8, 2015. We believe that the recreation fee program authorized by FLREA has been a highly successful and effective program, critical to providing quality recreation amenities and services to the public. This extension allows the program to continue uninterrupted as Congress considers its reauthorization for a longer time period. We also appreciate the attention that this Subcommittee has given to this important issue.

Permanent reauthorization of FLREA, as identified in the President's FY 2015 Budget, will provide an important authority that allows the agencies to continue to effectively serve the visiting public, provide high-quality visitor amenities, and respond quickly to meet changing visitor demands. FLREA provides these important benefits to visitors as a result of the agencies' ability to immediately reinvest recreation fee dollars and use them, without further appropriation, for site enhancements, resource protection, interpretive programs, visitor safety, and other vital services and improvements. We refer the Subcommittee to our June 18, 2013, testimony for additional details on how FLREA has benefitted the federal land management agencies and the visiting public.

**H.R. \_\_\_\_\_, Amendments to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act**

H.R. \_\_ amends FLREA in a number of ways. Among other changes, the draft bill revises the terminology and conditions under which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Park Service (NPS), the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) collect fees (identified as day use, entrance, recreation, and special recreation permit fees). The draft bill modifies the processes for ensuring public participation in the agencies' establishment of fees. It provides for additional categories and types of the America the Beautiful—National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass.

The draft bill also amends the expenditure and reporting requirements for agencies. Finally, the draft bill provides that the authority of the Secretaries will sunset five years after the date of enactment of the Act.

The draft bill represents a thoughtful approach to addressing many of the issues and concerns that have been identified by the Administration and by stakeholders regarding implementation of FLREA. This testimony reflects our initial review of the draft bill. The Department may provide additional views on this legislation after the bill is introduced and after conducting further analysis. The Department looks forward to working with Subcommittee on this important issue.

We believe there are several core elements of the recreation fee program authorized by FLREA that have contributed to the success of the program,<sup>1</sup> and that each of these core elements should be contained in any reauthorization of FLREA. One element is the ability for agencies to retain fees, and reinvest fee dollars where they are collected without further appropriation. This element of the program has ensured visitor support for the program. Visitor satisfaction surveys conducted in the past three years by BLM, FWS, NPS, and USFS also have found that the vast majority of visitors (about 90% of respondents) are satisfied with the level of amenities and services provided at FLREA sites and believe that the recreation fees they pay are reasonable.

A second core element is the creation of an interagency program. By providing a single recreation fee authority for the agencies, FLREA has enhanced customer service, efficiency, and consistency in fee collection and expenditure and establishment of national fee policies, such as fee-free days, and the creation of the successful Recreation.gov website. The recreation program has improved coordination among agencies which benefits the visiting public – making recreation sites more accessible and information easier to find. Furthermore, while ensuring coordination, FLREA acknowledges and allows for differences among the agencies. This is important because the agencies have different missions, and are unique in the services they provide to the public and in the services the public expects from the agencies.

The administrative ability to establish recreation fees for a range of activities, including flexibility to charge for unique services or amenities and new emerging amenities that could benefit visitors, is a third core element of the success of the recreation fee program. In setting any fees, the agencies seek the public's input, and there are protections in the FLREA program to ensure there are no disadvantages to the local communities. Each agency has developed policies consistent with FLREA to ensure that the public receives notification about agency proposals and has an opportunity to provide input to agencies as they consider new recreation fees and changes to existing recreation fees.

A final core element of the success of the recreation fee program is long-term authority. Knowing that a program is not likely to change every few years provides certainty to visitors, and enables the agencies to efficiently implement the program and to manage multi-year projects that improve visitor safety, experience and opportunities. This element also allows for the development of key partnerships with outfitters, other vendors, and communities that rely on the

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<sup>1</sup> See the Triennial Report to Congress, Implementation of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, May 2012, [http://www.doi.gov/ppa/upload/FLREA\\_Triennial\\_Report\\_2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.doi.gov/ppa/upload/FLREA_Triennial_Report_2012_FINAL.pdf)

economic benefits of visitation and investments made by the agencies. and to provide key programs.

The draft bill appears to contain many of these core elements, such as authority for an interagency program and the ability of agencies to retain and reinvest fees at the sites where they were collected. However, we note that it does not appear to provide for long-term authority, or for administrative flexibility for agencies.

With respect to a long-term authority, Section 820 of the draft bill includes a five-year sunset date. We recommend that Congress permanently authorize this program,. Permanent authorization would not preclude the Congress from ongoing oversight of the program, and the agencies have consistently submitted reports of their activities to Congress. With respect to administrative flexibility, Sections 806 and 807 of the draft bill identify and limit the types of activities for which the agencies could establish fees for or authorize under FLREA. We are concerned that, as written, the draft bill may preclude agencies from permitting or charging fees for certain well-established recreational events and activities currently authorized under FLREA. We also seek clarity on the relationship between the prohibitions and fee authority set forth in the draft bill and on the factors to be considered in determining fees, to enhance consistency and effectiveness in the agencies' implementation of the recreation fee program.

We look forward to working with the Committee on appropriate language to ensure that the agencies will be able to effectively and efficiently manage the breadth of activities that occur on the lands they manage and provide for the diverse current and future recreational needs of the public, and to provide other clarifying and technical amendments.

#### H.R. 2743, Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act and H.R. 3976, Wounded Veterans Recreation Act

H.R. 2743 would make the America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available at a discount for life to any veteran who was separated from military service under conditions other than dishonorable, if the veteran provides proof of that status by presenting a DD214. H.R. 3976 would also make the America the Beautiful –National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available for the lifetime of the passholder for any veteran with a service-connected disability, as defined in section 101 of title 38, United States Code.

The Department supports the intent of these bills to honor the service of our veterans. Men and women who have served in the armed forces have made tremendous contributions to this country, and we honor their service. In 2006, the agencies established the first fee-free day in honor of veterans at recreation fee sites across the country. Every year since 2006, the agencies have established at least one fee-free day to honor veterans. In 2013, for example, the agencies established three days—Veterans Day and the two weekend days before it—as fee-free in honor of veterans.

In 2012, the agencies announced a free military version of the America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Annual Pass for current members of the military and their dependents. Although this military pass is not available to veterans, many veterans are eligible for other discounted passes, such as the Senior Pass granting lifetime access to U.S. citizens over

62 for \$10, and the Access Pass granting free lifetime access for permanently disabled U.S. citizens.

With the military pass, the fee-free days in honor of veterans, and the eligibility of many veterans for the Senior Pass or the Access Pass, we believe that the agencies are providing honor and recognition for the men and women who are serving or who have served our nation in the armed forces. If the Committee moves forward with this legislation, we would like to work with you and the USFS and Department of Veterans Affairs to address a number of logistical, cost and other implementation issues associated with a special pass for veterans.

### Conclusion

In addition to drawing people outdoors to learn, exercise, work and volunteer, outdoor recreation is a significant contributor to the national economy and the economies of communities that surround the lands we manage. It is important that we make recreational opportunities available in communities across the nation, to promote health and fitness, engage our youth, and inspire the next generations to conserve and protect America's precious resources. In 2012, the Outdoor Industry Association reported that recreation activities generate \$646 billion dollars in spending each year, and support 6.1 million jobs. In particular, the approximately 383 million visits to DOI-managed lands in 2011 contributed an estimated \$42.3 billion in economic output to the surrounding economies through trip-related spending. The approximately 230 million visitors to FLREA sites in 2011 contributed an estimated \$25.2 billion of the \$42.3 billion total. Recreation-related spending on DOI-managed lands supported an estimated 352,000 jobs in the communities surrounding federal lands, of which an estimated 210,000 are related to FLREA visitation.

With revenues from the recreation fee program, the agencies have been able to implement thousands of projects that directly benefit visitors. These projects support public safety, maintain recreation sites, provide eye-opening educational experiences, build informational exhibits, fund interpretive programs, engage youth, and leverage other funding sources to stretch each visitor's dollar further. The recreation fee program sustains a significant portion of the Department's youth programs, which enable us to increase the engagement of younger generations in the outdoors and develop an awareness of public resource stewardship. In addition, the recreation fee program has supported the Recreation.gov website, which provides convenient, one-stop access for those making reservations, securing permits, and building itineraries for travel to federal recreation sites across the United States. Nearly 3.5 million reservations were made in FY2013

The Department supports the recreation fee program and has found that FLREA facilitates efficiency, consistency, and good customer service by enabling interagency cooperation and public participation. Recreation fee authority is a vital component of our Department's ability to serve as effective stewards of the federal lands we treasure.

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