

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SOUKUP
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

CONCERNING H.R. 4294, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO ENTER INTO COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS TO PROTECT NATURAL RESOURCES OF UNITS OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS ON LAND INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF UNITS OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.

March 30, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 4294, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to enter into cooperative agreements to protect park natural resources through collaborative efforts on land inside and outside of units of the National Park System.

The Department supports enactment of this bill with one technical amendment.

H.R. 4294 would authorize the Secretary to enter into cooperative agreements with willing State, local, or tribal governments, other public entities, educational institutions, private nonprofit organizations, and private landowners to protect natural resources of units of the National Park System. These cooperative agreements would benefit the partners and enhance science-based natural resource stewardship through such projects as preservation and restoration of coastal and riparian watersheds, prevention and control of invasive species, and restoration of natural systems including wildlife habitat. The scope of the cooperative agreements would cover projects that include management of the natural resources, as well as inventory, monitoring, and restoration activities for preserving park natural resources.

The bill would prohibit the use of appropriated funds for land acquisition, regulatory activity, or the development, maintenance, or operation of infrastructure, except for ancillary support facilities that the Secretary determines to be necessary for the completion of projects or activities identified in the cooperative agreements. All cooperative agreements authorized by this bill would be voluntary.

According to a General Accounting Office (GAO) report from February 2005, the National Park Service is the only major Federal land management agency that does not have authority to expend resources outside its boundaries when there is a benefit to the natural resources within the boundaries of these lands. This lack of consistency among Federal agencies was cited by GAO as a barrier to effective control of invasive species on Federal and non-Federal lands. This bill would provide authority to the National Park Service (NPS), similar to that already held by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, to use appropriated funds to enter into cooperative agreements with various partners when such activities provide clear and direct benefits to park natural resources through collaborative efforts on lands inside and outside of National Park System units. For example, at the Grand Canyon National Park, if NPS had this authority, resource managers could work with the Hualapai Indian Tribe to control tamarisk, an invasive tree, to mutually protect the reservation and the park from further infestation.

Of the 83 million acres managed by NPS, 2.6 million acres are infested by invasive plants such as mile-a-minute, kudzu, and knapweed, reducing the natural diversity of these areas. When populations of native plants are decreased, the animals that depend upon them lack the food and shelter needed for survival. This is especially a concern for threatened and endangered species found on parklands. In the case of plants, these single species stands are also more vulnerable to disease and can serve as fuel for wildfires. Because invasive plants and animals cross geographic and jurisdictional boundaries, it is more efficient to control these invasive species through collaborative efforts both inside and outside of park boundaries. If the NPS can rapidly respond and prevent invasive species from entering our parks instead of trying to control and eradicate them once they are within our borders, we can better protect our park natural resources and in many cases, avoid the problem altogether. In addition, by partnering with willing private landowners, local entities, universities and nonprofit organizations, we can recognize a cost savings through shared inventory, monitoring and control activities.

The authority in H.R. 4294 would also benefit the NPS in areas beyond invasive species. For example, at Cape Cod

National Seashore in Massachusetts, three large wetlands within the park have been impaired from salt marsh levees on adjacent lands causing a restricted tidal flow to these systems; some of these impairments date back 100 years. With no fresh water entering the wetlands, the water quality has been degraded resulting in large fish kills and the production of nuisance insects, as well as the loss of storm surge protection. Using this authority, the NPS would be able to assist local towns in improving water control structures outside the park, which in turn would help improve the park's wetlands.

The GAO report also found that collaboration and coordination among Federal agencies, and between Federal and non-Federal entities, is critical to battling invasive species. Treating invasive plants in one area, but not on neighboring lands, can limit its effectiveness. Because the NPS does not have the authority to work outside of its boundaries, the NPS is often perceived as unwilling to be a partner in grassroots efforts to address shared natural resource management issues at the local or regional level. In many of our parks, the NPS manages only the downstream portion of a river. By working with upstream communities to improve water quality and to decrease sedimentation and runoff, the entire watershed can benefit from these partnerships. For example, at Morristown National Historical Park, Primrose Brook contains a genetically pure strain of brook trout. Ninety five percent of the watershed outside the park is protected. Through cooperative agreements with private landowners, best management practices could be implemented to protect the entire watershed.

An informal survey conducted by NPS of our parks indicates that the natural resources in at least 63 parks in 28 states would benefit as a result of having this authority. Potential projects would include working with the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the U.S. Forest Service to put up fencing along the border of Glacier National Park to restore white and limber pine and conduct wetlands surveys; at Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument in Idaho, the NPS could work with adjacent private landowners to prevent irrigation canal seepage that negatively impacts the Snake River; at Yellowstone National Park, the NPS could partner with the State of Wyoming to initiate groundwater studies in the larger Yellowstone groundwater area that is located north of the park; and at the Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri, the NPS could undertake an educational program on the importance and protection of the karst environment.

Although the bill focuses on the benefits to natural resources within parks from collaborative efforts, there are also economic benefits that could be realized through this authority. Many of our recreation, lakeshore and seashore parks attract visitors for water-based activities such as boating, canoeing, and fishing. If NPS can improve the water quality in these parks by working with nearby landowners and communities to protect the larger watersheds, then visitors will have a more positive experience that includes a variety of recreational activities. Other visitors enjoy the diverse plant and animal species living in our parklands and spend their time watching and photographing wildlife in their native habitat. With this authority, the NPS can restore riparian areas, replant native grasses, shrubs and trees, and eliminate invasive species that compete and replace native wildlife. In addition, communities surrounding our parks depend upon the dollars that visitors pump into the local economies while visiting these areas. Having a diverse natural system of resources within parks draws larger numbers of tourists to these communities.

Currently, there are some narrowly defined activities for which the Secretary has the authority to expend NPS resources beyond those lands owned by the NPS. These limited authorities include cooperative agreements for work on national trails; work with State and local parks that either adjoin or are in the vicinity of units of the National Park System; or assistance to nearby law enforcement and fire prevention agencies for emergency situations related to law enforcement, fire fighting and rescue.

Since the bill's introduction, the North American Weed Management Association, a network of public and private professional weed managers who are involved in implementing county, municipal, district, State, provincial or Federal noxious weed laws, has voiced its support for this authority. Other organizations are currently reviewing the legislation, and we anticipate similar support from these groups.

We propose one technical amendment to authorize the NPS to partner with other Federal agencies on these cooperative agreements where that authority does not otherwise exist.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to comment. This concludes my prepared remarks and I will be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members might have.

Proposed Amendment to H.R. 4294

On p. 2, line 6, insert "other Federal agencies," before "other public entities".