

**STATEMENT OF FRANK LANDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE  
THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS  
CONCERNING H.R. 1786, GET REWARDING OUTDOOR WORK FOR OUR  
VETERANS ACT, AND DISCUSSION DRAFT OF H.R. \_\_\_\_, MILITARY AND  
VETERANS IN PARKS ACT.**

**July 20, 2023**

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 1786, the Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans Act (GROW Act), and a discussion draft of H.R. \_\_\_\_, the Military and Veterans in Parks Act (MVP Act).

The Department strongly supports promoting and enhancing outdoor recreation opportunities for active service members and veterans on recreational lands under the Department's jurisdiction, and facilitating opportunities for the hiring and promoting of veterans within the Department's workforce, goals of both H.R. 1786 and the discussion draft of the MVP Act.

The Department employs almost 12,000 veterans Department-wide. Within the NPS, over fifteen percent of the National Park Service's (NPS) workforce are veterans. These 3,300 veterans work in a wide range of natural and cultural resource roles, including law enforcement, maintenance, information technology, and administration, and, importantly, include both the NPS Director and the NPS Deputy Director for Operations.

**H.R. 1786, Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans Act (GROW Act)**

The Department strongly supports the goal of H.R. 1786 of facilitating greater opportunities for employing veterans in conservation and resource management work. We recognize the immense pool of talent represented in our nation's veterans and, along with other Federal agencies, we take seriously our commitment to hiring and promoting veterans. We would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee on amendments to address the concerns described in this statement.

Our comments are limited to section 3(b) of H.R. 1786. We defer to the Department of Veterans Affairs for views on section 2, which requires a report on the Warrior Training Advancement Course, and to the Department of Labor on section 3(a), which requires the establishment of guidelines containing best practices for Federal agencies that carry out programs to employ veterans transitioning from service in the Armed Forces.

Section 3(b) would require the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, to establish a pilot program to hire veterans in conservation and resource management positions within the Department of the Interior. It would require an initial briefing to Congressional committees no later than 60 days after enactment on how the pilot program will be implemented and legislative recommendations for improvement. It would further require a

second briefing to Congressional committees within one year of the start of the pilot program on implementation progress, and the issuance of a final written report providing data on the pilot program to those same Congressional committees within 30 days of the pilot's completion.

The NPS has had a strong record of employing veterans and their spouses, including robust use of applicable special hiring authorities such as the Veterans Recruitment Appointment authority, the 30% or More Disabled Veteran authority, Spouse Preference, and the authorities under the Veterans Employment Opportunities Act of 1998. As noted above, more than 3,300 veterans are employed by the NPS, comprising over fifteen percent of the NPS workforce.

In addition to directly hiring veterans into federal positions, the NPS also participates in innovative programs, such as the Traditional Trades Advancement Program (TTAP) and SkillBridge, which provide job skills and experiences that prepare veterans for post-military careers in the Federal government or elsewhere in the public or private sectors. The TTAP is a national, pre-apprenticeship-style internship program administered by the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center. TTAP introduces youth and veterans to skills and careers in the historic trades, such as carpentry and masonry, at NPS sites nationwide through an earn-as-you-learn experience. With SkillBridge, the NPS partners with the Department of Defense to allow active service members to intern or apprentice in NPS sites as Volunteers-in-Parks, where they can receive training and gain valuable civilian work experience in a variety of career fields before they transition out of military service.

Like the NPS, both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have robust programs to employ veterans and their spouses. The FWS employs over 1,500 veterans, comprising over sixteen percent of the agency's workforce. Through a new entry-level hiring initiative, the FWS is directly recruiting veterans and others eligible for special hiring authorities into positions in human resources, finance, information technology, law enforcement, biological fields, and other administrative areas. The FWS has also hosted and hired veterans participating in vocational training through the Veteran Readiness and Employment program. By advancing these initiatives and utilizing our existing special hiring authorities, the FWS is able to offer a broad range of career opportunities to our nation's veterans.

The BLM offers a number of hiring programs that benefit veterans, transitioning service members and their families. Veterans may be given preference during the hiring process when applying for positions, and depending on eligibility, may also qualify for special hiring authorities utilized through the Department. Over the past several years, for example, the BLM has developed Wildland Firefighting Crews specifically designed to employ military Veterans matching our veterans' skills with wildland firefighting. Many of the skills veterans learned in the military translate to wildland firefighting, such as teamwork; decisive leadership; risk mitigation and management; logistics and emergency medicine. BLM veteran crews provide job and career avenues for military veterans, allowing them to find post-military careers that provide a sense of serving and working within a team setting.

As noted above, the Department supports the bill's overall goal of facilitating greater opportunities for veteran employment. The pilot program envisioned by H.R. 1786 has the

potential to add to the range of job opportunities that veterans have currently within the Department. However, we are concerned that the timelines contained in the bill for briefing Congressional committees, implementing the pilot program, and the issuing a written report would not be sufficient to consult with our interagency partners at the Departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs, design an effective and evidence-based pilot program, and implement the pilot for a sufficient length of time from which to gather data to inform our recommendations and reporting. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on amendments to address these concerns.

## **DISCUSSION DRAFT OF H.R. \_\_\_\_\_, Military and Veterans in Parks Act (MVP Act)**

The Department strongly supports the goals of the discussion draft titled the “Military and Veterans in Parks Act” or “MVP Act” to promote and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities for active service members and veterans on recreational lands under the Department’s jurisdiction, and we appreciate that the discussion draft is an effort to expand those opportunities. The Department is providing preliminary views on this discussion draft and looks forward to providing additional comments on this discussion draft and working with the Committee as this bill is introduced.

Section 2 of the discussion draft addresses adaptive trails and opportunities for military service members and veterans. Efforts to provide more accessible recreational and trail opportunities to the public not only help military service members and veterans but all people with accessibility issues. The Department is committed to meeting standards for accessible trails when constructing new or modifying existing trails. The discussion draft uses the term, “adaptive trails” which is not defined in current authorities, and also identifies a number of requirements that would require significant time, effort and resources to meet if not brought into alignment with the other authorities already in use.

Section 3 of the discussion draft provides direction for the Department to work with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense to develop education and public awareness materials to members of the Armed Forces and veterans. The Department currently works closely with these agencies, and the Director of the NPS currently co-chairs with the VA the Task Force on Outdoor Recreation for Veterans. The Department agrees with the importance of outdoor recreation and is committed to providing public information regarding its remarkable variety of recreational programs and resources across its bureaus.

Section 4 of the discussion draft would amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) by exempting all current and former military members from paying recreation fees. Currently, we offer no-cost annual passes to active-duty military members and their dependents, and no-cost lifetime passes to veterans and members of Gold Star Families. The annual and lifetime passes, however, do not cover the full cost of expanded amenity recreation fees or special recreation permit fees. This section would direct that in addition to no-cost entrance passes, active-duty members and their dependents, veterans, and Gold Star Families would also be exempt from standard amenity recreation fees, expanded amenity recreation fees, and special recreation permit fees. It also provides for streamlining special recreation permits to veterans organizations, and exempting these organizations from allocations of visitor use days. The

Department notes that the exemption for fees has the potential to have a financial impact to federal agency fee collections, in turn impacting our ability to use those funds to maintain and operate local recreation facilities. Additionally, other portions of Section 4, such as the allocated use exemption, may have significant impacts to the recreational experiences of other public land users.

Section 5 of the discussion draft requires the Department to seek to enter into partnerships or agreements with State, Tribal, local or private entities with expertise in outdoor-related volunteer and wellness programs for members of the Armed Forces or veterans. Currently, the NPS Submerged Resources Centers (SRC) Wounded Veterans in Parks (WVIP) program engages wounded veterans in underwater scientific and resource management mission-based opportunities that provide therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits contributing to their physical and emotional health. Since 2017 the NPS SRC WVIP program has conducted 15 projects working with 5 different veteran service organizations in 6 different NPS units. Section 6 directs the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to develop and make public a strategy to increase visits to Federal recreational lands by members of the Armed Forces, veterans and Gold Star Families. We look forward to giving further consideration to how these requirements would fit with the existing programs we have for these groups.

Section 7 of the discussion draft revises FLREA to add veterans organizations to the membership of Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RACs). The Department supports the concept of adding representation from military service members and veterans to Recreation RACs. The BLM notes, however, many RACs currently have difficulty getting and keeping enough members for a quorum. This could make it harder, especially if a location does not have a local or even regional veterans organization.

Section 8 of the discussion draft addresses providing career and volunteer opportunities for veterans in positions related to the management of Federal Recreational lands. As noted above, the Department appreciates that the experience and interests of many military veterans align well with the wide range of opportunities in natural and cultural resource lands management within the Department. We look forward to working with Congress to ensure that this section is not duplicative of current programs and authorities focused on the recruitment, training and hiring of veterans.

Finally, Section 9 of the discussion draft provides definitions that the Department is currently reviewing, and may have additional comments to ensure clarity in these definitions. The Department would like to have the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee to better understand the intent of some of the provisions and to provide additional comments and recommended amendments.

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