

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
REGARDING
DRAFT DISCUSSION BILL – THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT
AND MODERNIZATION ACT
October 28, 2015**

Chairman McClintock and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement and Modernization Act discussion draft. I am honored to speak before you today on how this draft legislation would affect the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Forest Service (Forest Service). I am Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, Forest Service, testifying today on behalf of USDA.

USDA appreciates the efforts of this Congress to extend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) to September 2017 in the most recent continuing resolution. This extension and previous extensions have allowed the federal land management agencies to continue to operate their developed recreation sites without any adverse impact on the public or their partners. These extensions have also given us an opportunity to discuss recreation fee authority on federal lands and identify ways to continue to deliver important outdoor recreational experiences to the American people.

REA AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES ON FEDERAL LANDS

I discussed the benefits of REA extensively in my testimony in June 2013 and February 2014. However, I want to reemphasize the importance of REA in ensuring that the American public and visitors from around the world have outstanding outdoor recreational experiences on federal lands.

From 1965 until the enactment of REA in 2004, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act provided federal land management agencies the authority to charge recreation fees. This authority was premised on the recognition by Congress that it is appropriate for those who use developed recreation sites on federal lands to shoulder more of the cost of operating and maintaining them. REA improves upon this authority in a fundamental way: REA gives the federal land management agencies the authority to retain and spend recreation fees at the sites where they are collected. This authority is critical to the ability of the federal land management

agencies under current budget constraints, rising costs, and increased public demand to improve recreational facilities and services and provide quality outdoor experiences on federal lands throughout the United States.

Recreation fee revenues generated under REA represent approximately 20 to 25 percent of the Forest Service's recreation budget and have made a huge difference in the agency's ability to offer world-class outdoor recreational experiences. Investments are made in some of the agency's most heavily used developed recreation sites to enhance public services, provide health and safety benefits and mitigate adverse impacts on cultural and natural resources. Retention of special recreation permit fees under REA also helps support administration of special recreation permits, including permits for commercial recreational activities like outfitting and guiding and recreation events. The authority to collect, retain, and spend funds locally to maintain and improve developed recreation sites and administer permits not only enhances visitor amenities and services at those sites, but also holds the agency accountable for expenditure of those funds.

However, recreation fee revenues collected under REA do not fully cover the cost of maintaining and servicing the sites where those fees are collected. Appropriated dollars, volunteers, and partnerships with outfitters and guides and others are also used to cover costs, leverage assistance, and provide in-kind services and value. For example, expenditure of recreation fee revenues is complemented by programs such as the 21st Century Service Conservation Corps, which brings America's youth and veterans from rural and urban areas to federal lands to build, maintain, and repair developed recreation sites as part of a public service initiative.

NEED FOR CONTINUED FOCUS ON RECREATION

Now, more than ever, the Forest Service must connect with urban, suburban, and rural populations and encourage outdoor stewardship to remain relevant in our ever-changing world. We know the benefits of outdoor recreational experiences on both physical and mental health. We know the demand for access to outdoor settings and outdoor recreational experiences is increasing, and we know that the Forest Service, along with the help of its partners, hosts the largest and most diverse array of outdoor recreational experiences in the world.

We also know that outdoor recreational experiences are the Forest Service's single largest contribution to the gross domestic product and local economies, generating over 13 billion dollars in revenue and supporting approximately 205,000 jobs. Many of these jobs are located in rural communities and are associated with numerous outdoor industries and small businesses. In addition, outdoor recreational experiences on National Forest System lands support over 5,000 outfitting and guiding operations, many of which are small businesses employing local citizens.

The Forest Service is focusing on strengthening and deepening connections with the public through outdoor recreational experiences. The agency has initiated a national effort to modernize its recreation concession program, enhance community service and volunteer programs, increase the diversity of visitors to the National Forest System, and implement technological innovations to provide even better public service.

THE DRAFT BILL

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft bill and hope to provide more detailed input in working with Congress directly on revised recreation fee authority. I will touch on some of the salient aspects of the draft bill today. The draft bill makes several significant revisions to REA that would enhance federal recreation fee authority while allowing the Forest Service to meet its goal of providing quality outdoor recreational experiences to the public. For example, the revised terminology for recreation fees in the draft bill more closely tracks the types of recreation fee sites on federal lands than the terminology in REA and addresses issues that have arisen in connection with standard amenity recreation fee authority under REA. The draft bill institutionalizes the military pass and provides for a youth visitation discount. In addition, the draft bill addresses accountability for tracking, managing, and reporting recreation fee revenues and expenditures. This issue is extremely important; USDA is committed to working with this committee, National Forest visitors, and the American public to ensure transparency and accountability in operation and management of the recreation fee program.

The draft bill replaces the requirement for Recreation Resource Advisory Committees with multiple, duplicative, formal public notice and comment processes. While we welcome a robust public involvement process, these procedures are retroactive and unnecessary to the extent they apply to existing recreation fees that meet the requirements of REA. Many of these recreation fees have already been subject to extensive public involvement. We would like to work with the committee to develop a more efficient process for obtaining public input on proposed new recreation fees and changes to existing recreation fees.

Some of the pilot authorities in Title III raise concerns. For example, it is not clear how the agencies would ensure campground concessioner accountability with regard to honoring recreation fee passes. Moreover, the campground concession authorities in Title III are inconsistent with the recreation fee provisions in Title VIII, which expressly do not apply to fees charged by campground concessioners. As a result, campground concessioners would be subject to the limitations and requirements on charging recreation fees in Title VIII.

Perhaps most significantly, the draft bill would require an Act of Congress to establish or change recreation fees. This provision would significantly undercut the ability of the federal land management agencies to manage the recreation fee program in a way that is responsive to local conditions and changing economics. Given the seasonal nature of many Forest Service sites and the time needed under current requirements for proposing fee changes, preparing fee proposals, and conducting all required public involvement, it can take a year to implement even small fee changes under REA. Requiring an Act of Congress would add great complexity and uncertainty to the process that would significantly delay or even prevent the federal land management agencies from offering new and enhanced amenities and services to the public.

CONCLUSION

I would like to thank this subcommittee for its commitment to recreation fee retention authority, which is critical to the Forest Service's national recreation program. Fee retention authority enables the agency to provide consistently excellent outdoor experiences at developed recreation

sites across the United States. This authority has strengthened the connection between visitors and the lands they cherish by requiring that the fees they pay benefit the sites where they were collected. Thousands of projects, large and small, have been supported by REA fees since 2004. Visitors consistently comment that they are willing to pay reasonable recreation fees if they know the money will be used to improve the sites they are visiting.

Moreover, fee retention facilitates efficiency, consistency, and good customer service through interagency cooperation and public participation. The agencies strive to manage visitor contributions effectively, efficiently, and in an open and collaborative manner. The administrative and policy changes the Forest Service has introduced since 2004 demonstrate the agency's commitment to improve its recreation fee program, both in terms of customer service and good governance.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the draft bill, as well as recreation fee retention and its critical importance in providing outdoor recreational experiences to the American public. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.