

**STATEMENT OF PEGGY O'DELL
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
REGARDING THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT**

September 17, 2015

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to appear before you today to discuss the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and the recreation fee program.

Every year, over 500 million Americans and travelers from around the world visit our national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges and public lands to hike, bike, fish, camp and otherwise enjoy the abundant recreation opportunities offered on our federal lands.

Not only do these visitors take their positive experiences home and benefit from the physical activity that promotes health and quality of life, but recreation is a significant contributor to the national economy and the economies of the communities that surround the lands we manage. In 2012, recreation activities on federal lands generated approximately \$51 billion in spending, which translates to 880,000 jobs. And, with respect to federal recreation fee sites in particular, approximately 223 million visitors contributed an estimated \$22.1 billion in economic output to the surrounding communities, and supported and estimated 197,000 jobs in communities surrounding these sites in 2013.

The enactment of FLREA in 2004 enabled us to enhance these visits with greater recreation opportunities and services by leveraging recreation fees to implement thousands of projects that directly benefit visitors. Fee revenue is largely retained at the sites where it is collected to support recreation visitor projects.

In 2014, Interior's bureaus collected over \$230 million in recreation fees to support over 1000 projects. These projects support public safety, maintain recreation sites, provide eye-opening educational experiences, build informational exhibits, fund interpretive programs, and offer a wide range of recreational and cultural opportunities.

The authority for FLREA is scheduled to sunset September 30, 2016, and, if it does, no agency will have explicit recreation fee authority because FLREA repealed the recreation fee provisions previously provided in the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act and Recreational Fee Demonstration Program statutes. We are concerned that a potential lapse in this authority will detrimentally impact the agencies' ability to support projects that improve visitor safety, experiences, and opportunities. Furthermore, although the authority will be in place through September, 2016, beginning October 1st, the agencies will be faced with challenging decisions as we try to anticipate the future of the program and make decisions about ongoing operations such as issuance of the annual pass.

RECREATION FEE PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Enacted in December 2004, FLREA authorizes five agencies to collect and expend recreation fees on lands they manage: the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service (USFS). Each of the agencies has a distinct mission. However, all the agencies share the goal of providing quality recreation experiences to the public. By providing a single recreation fee authority for the agencies and authorizing an interagency annual pass, FLREA has enhanced customer service, efficiency, and consistency in fee collection and expenditure and establishment of national fee policies, such as fee-free days.

FLREA also provides needed flexibility for these agencies, each with unique authorizations, geographies and management responsibilities, to operate effectively. NPS and FWS entrance fee sites typically encompass entire management units, such as Glacier National Park in Montana, and Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge in Washington. BLM, USFS, and Reclamation standard amenity recreation fee sites typically consist of sites within management units that have been significantly developed in response to visitors' demand for facilities and services, such as the accessibility amenities at BLM's Pumphouse recreation site on the Upper Colorado in Kremling, Colorado, and the boat launching, camping and day use amenities at Reclamation's New Melones Lake Recreation Area in California.

In addition to "entrance fees" charged at sites managed by FWS and NPS, and "standard amenity recreation fees" charged at sites managed by BLM, Reclamation, and USFS, the agencies also charge "expanded amenity recreation fees" for certain amenities and services. FLREA also authorizes the agencies to issue special recreation permits for specialized recreational uses, such as use of off-highway vehicle trails, recreation events, and outfitting and guiding, and to charge fees for those permits.

The agencies also provide an interagency pass that covers many recreation opportunities on lands managed by each of the agencies across the nation and simplifies the way in which the public can access public lands and pay for amenities. Visitors can use a single pass to visit all five agencies' sites. Beginning January 1, 2016, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will also participate in the interagency pass program. This interagency program includes the Annual Pass, the Senior Pass, the Access Pass, and the Volunteer Pass. It also includes the Military Pass, available since 2012 to all current military members and their families. 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, and the Access Pass granting free lifetime access for permanently disabled U.S. citizens. And, beginning September 1, 2015, the agencies implemented the Every Kid in a Park 4th Grade Pass that provides fourth graders and their families nationwide free access to our federal lands.

Visitor support and public participation are integral to the recreation fee program. Visitor satisfaction surveys conducted in the past six years by BLM, FWS, NPS, and USFS have found that most visitors (about 90% of respondents) are satisfied with the level of amenities and

services provided and believe that the recreation fees they pay are reasonable. FLREA promotes visitor satisfaction and enhances recreation facilities and services by authorizing fee collection and reinvestment for these amenities and services.

While recreation fees provide a source of funding to support recreation at many developed and popular areas, the agencies continue to offer a huge number of recreation opportunities at no cost. BLM manages over 245 million surface acres of the United States, and charges recreation fees on less than 1% of that acreage. Over 93% of the 464 FWS refuges that are open to the public have free entry. Of the 408 units of the National Park Service, 227, more than half, do not charge any FLREA fees. Reclamation currently charges recreation fees authorized by FLREA at only one site, New Melones Lake.

The recreation fee program also supports Recreation.gov, the federal website which provides convenient one-stop access for those making reservations, securing permits, and building itineraries for travel to federal recreation sites around the country. There are thousands of facilities on Recreation.gov and each year the inventory is growing. The rapidly expanding use of internet and social media for access to recreation, travel and tourism information makes Recreation.gov an important tool for customer service, as well as providing important marketing exposure for gateway communities. The NPS also uses Recreation.gov for several lottery drawings and permits, including the White House Christmas Tree Lighting event and the White House Easter Egg Roll. Recreation.gov supports the National Travel and Tourism Strategy by offering international visitors access to travel itineraries and easy-to-find information about destinations on our public lands and waters. Since its launch, Recreation.gov has received nearly 1.2 billion page views and has processed over 7.5 million reservations. The website experienced a 27% increase in traffic between 2012 and 2014.

Finally, FLREA requires agencies to establish special accounts for recreation fee revenues, making the funding available until expended. In many parts of the United States, a large proportion of visitation, and therefore recreation fee revenue collection, occurs during the last quarter of the fiscal year (July through September), which makes it difficult to expend funds in the same fiscal year they are collected. The ability to spend recreation fees over multiple fiscal years enables responsible and effective use of fee revenue, and permits the agencies to expend funds over multiple years for large contracts, projects, and expenditures requiring significant investment for implementation.

Each agency has developed procedures and tools to ensure accountability in administration of the recreation fee program and share the objective of fair and transparent revenue collection, controlling the cost of collection while maintaining consistently high levels of service, and avoiding accumulation of unobligated revenues. Average annual FLREA revenue for each agency from over the past three fiscal years (2012-2014) is as follows: NPS – \$180.8 million; USFS – \$68.1 million; BLM – \$17.4 million; FWS – \$5.1 million; and Reclamation – \$547,000. In FY 2014, the cost of fee collection across all FLREA agencies was 13.2% of gross fee revenues.

FUNDED PROJECTS

Recreation fees collected under FLREA have funded thousands of projects that directly benefit visitors. FLREA authorizes agencies to expend recreation fees on:

- Repair, maintenance, and facility enhancement related directly to visitor enjoyment, visitor access, and health and safety;
- Interpretation, visitor information, visitor services, and visitor needs assessments;
- Habitat restoration directly related to wildlife-dependent recreation including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography;
- Law enforcement related to public use and recreation;
- Direct operating or capital costs associated with the recreation fee program; and
- Fee management agreements.

Details of the recreation fee program and specific projects funded by FLREA across the agencies may be found in the three Triennial Reports the agencies have submitted to Congress detailing the implementation of the recreation program across the agencies. A copy of the comprehensive May 2012 Triennial Report may be found at http://www.doi.gov/ppa/upload/FLREA_Triennial_Report_2012_FINAL.pdf. A fourth report, the 2015 Triennial Report will soon be submitted to Congress.

Examples of recent recreation fee projects completed and planned by the agencies and that will be highlighted in the 2015 Triennial Report include the following:

- In Montana, BLM's HiLine District, in partnership with the Montana Conservation Corps, used \$18,415 to build fencing and repair facilities at three campgrounds in the Little Rocky Mountains in Montana in FY 2013 and FY 2014.
- In New Jersey, Walkill River National Wildlife Refuge used \$17,500 to provide additional opportunities for hunting and to enhance fishing facilities in FY 2013. The Refuge provided youth archery classes and special fishing events for children and disabled veterans.
- In Alaska, Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park and Preserve has devoted \$3,363,984 from FY 2012 through FY 2014 to rehabilitate 12 miles and relocate seven miles of the Copper Lake Trail. The project establishes trail markings and signage, restores 59 acres of damaged wetlands, and facilitates hiking, camping and salmon fishing.
- In California, Reclamation has used approximately \$140,000 annually to provide law enforcement services at New Melones Lake Recreation Area through a partnership with the Tuolumne County Sheriff's office.
- In Arizona, USFS used \$45,000 in FY 2013, to improve a Salt River boat ramp within the Tonto National Forest to facilitate safe access to the river and accommodate more boats.

Recreation fees have also supported partnerships with numerous youth organizations for projects that mentor and employ youth who gain valuable experience repairing and constructing trails, and working as resource interns. And, for managing large numbers of weekend visitors, BLM has leveraged recreation fees for emergency medical services, search and rescue, education

efforts of proper use of off-highway vehicles, and law enforcement at sites such as Imperial Sand Dunes in California.

CONCLUSION

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act enables agencies to provide enhanced recreation experiences at recreation sites around the country managed by BLM, FWS, NPS, Reclamation, and USFS. FLREA strengthens the connection between visitors and the lands they cherish by requiring that the fees they pay benefit the sites they visit. Thousands of projects, large and small, have been supported by FLREA fees since 2004.

The Department supports the permanent authorization of FLREA. The sunset of FLREA would detrimentally impact agencies' ability to support many recreation fee projects that improve visitor safety, experiences, and opportunities; allow for key partnerships; and provide key programs such as Recreation.gov. Some opportunities, such as certain developed campgrounds or interpretive tours may be closed or discontinued. New facilities and upgrades to existing facilities may be delayed, resulting in a greater backlog of deferred maintenance. Law enforcement patrols may be reduced. Visitors may encounter fewer staff to educate and assist them.

The agencies have previously identified several areas where changes to the program could result in more effective service to recreation visitors and the public at large. These areas include adjustments to the BLM and USFS public participation processes, possible expansion of the program beyond the current agencies, reviewing interagency pass benefits, and utilization of existing and new technologies to improve visitor services and agency operations. While we believe that these areas should be considered as the Committee considers permanent authorization of FLREA, we believe that FLREA is highly effective as enacted.

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 has been a vital component of our Department's ability to serve as effective stewards of the public lands we treasure. We look forward to working with the Committee on reauthorization of this program.

Ms. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or any other members of the Committee may have.