

STATEMENT OF KATHERINE H. STEVENSON, ACTING ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, BUSINESS SERVICES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 617, A BILL TO MAKE THE NATIONAL PARKS AND FEDERAL RECREATIONAL LANDS PASS AVAILABLE AT A DISCOUNT TO CERTAIN VETERANS.

JULY 12, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 617, the Veterans Eagle Parks Pass Act. The legislation would require the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to make the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available at a cost of \$10 to any veteran separated from military service under conditions other than dishonorable.

In the 108th Congress, Congress enacted the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Public Law 108-447) (REA), a major overhaul of the fee system that governs the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Forest System, certain public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and recreational lands administered by the Bureau of Reclamation.

Our federal lands provide Americans and visitors from around the world special places for recreation, education, reflection, and solace. Public lands and waters managed by the Department of the Interior hosted over 470 million recreation visits. Ensuring that the federal lands continue to play this important role in American life and culture requires that we maintain visitor facilities and services and enhance visitor opportunities. Such efforts require a source of funding with which we can quickly respond to increases in

visitor demand. Recreation fee revenues are a critical source of such supplemental funding that significantly enhance our efforts to address the deferred maintenance backlog at our National Parks, better manage other federal lands, and respond quickly to changes in visitation levels and service requirements.

REA established a new multi-agency America the Beautiful-National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass (the new pass) to cover entrance fees for NPS and FWS and standard amenity recreation fees for BLM, Forest Service, and BOR, generally for a period of 12 months. Sales of the new passes began in January 2007 after an extensive interagency planning process. The new passes are more convenient to purchase, are more durable, and are designed with a collectible image of public lands. All new passes are now available to the public at thousands of interagency field sites. Annual passes, brochures, hangtags and decals also are available via the internet, by calling a toll free phone number and through select third-party vendors. Revenue from the sale of the new passes is used to improve visitor services and protect resources.

As the Congress considered establishing the new pass, discussion occurred about which groups of people might be eligible for discounted passes. At one time, legislation was introduced to provide free passes to all September 11, 2001 responders and their families. Other groups have also been suggested as potential groups to be considered for discounts. However, at that time, a decision was made ultimately by Congress to offer a discounted pass to senior citizens and a free lifetime pass to U.S. citizens or persons who permanently reside in the United States and who have a medical determination and

documentation of blindness or permanent disability, including disabled veterans. We agree with this approach.

Veterans have made tremendous contributions to this country, and we honor their service. Many National Park System units, including all of the memorials within the District of Columbia and the USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii do not charge fees as required by law. Many other parks and National Wildlife Refuges, as well as most BLM and U. S. Forest Service locations do not charge fees.

In 2006, in lieu of establishing a discount pass for Veterans, the Department of the Interior established an entrance fee-free day for all veterans and their accompanying family members on Veterans Day each year. We would like to extend the entrance fee-free day to all active duty military personnel and their family members, effective November 11, 2007, and on each subsequent Veterans Day as an additional way to recognize them and thank them for their service. We understand the Secretary of Agriculture supports adopting this same policy with regard to standard amenity recreation fee sites managed by the U.S. Forest Service. We believe this is an appropriate way to honor all those who have served and are currently providing military service to our country without creating a precedent for carving out exceptions to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which was carefully developed to provide a comprehensive approach to fee management.

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