

**JOINT STATEMENT OF  
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ENVIRONMENT,  
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BEFORE THE  
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS,  
FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS AND HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER  
REGARDING  
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FEE AUTHORITY ON FEDERAL LANDS  
JUNE 18, 2008**

Chairman Grijalva, Chairwoman Napolitano and Members of the subcommittees, thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to appear before you today to discuss the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA). Through our collective mission, we provide the American public and visitors from around the world with outstanding recreational opportunities on our federal lands. Since the enactment of FLREA in 2004, we have made tremendous progress in accomplishing this goal. While we acknowledge ongoing challenges associated with implementing this program, we continue to address these concerns as we move to fully implement the statute.

We are continuously striving to enhance the experience of visitors to our federal lands by maintaining high-quality recreation facilities and programs. To achieve this, we rely on four principle sources of support: 1) appropriated funding, 2) recreation fees authorized under FLREA, 3) private businesses and 4) partnerships and volunteers. Since it was instituted as a demonstration program, the Recreation Fee Program has provided an immediate and flexible source of funding that is and has been a fundamental component

of this sustainable funding model. In fact, FLREA funds can have a positive impact on the other sources of funding, such as providing the federal money necessary to leverage partnership dollars and facilitating volunteer work that results in on-the-ground benefits. Even with the fee program in place, fees are only charged where amenities or services go beyond what is normally expected on non-fee federal lands. Moreover, the vast majority of federal lands remain free to the public with no entrance or standard amenity fees.

Specifically, the locations that remain accessible to the public at no charge include:

- 99.5% of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands
- 78% of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) sites
- 62% of National Park Service (NPS) sites
- 98% of USDA Forest Service lands; 65% of USDA Forest Service developed sites

Every year, over 400 million Americans and visitors from around the world visit our national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges and BLM-managed public lands to hike, bike, fish, camp and otherwise enjoy the abundant recreation opportunities offered on our federal lands.

Since Congress established it as a demonstration program in 1996, the Recreation Fee Program has helped us to enhance the experience of visitors to our federal lands.

Approximately \$2 billion has been collected by participating agencies since 1996. These dollars are translating into tangible improvements in visitor services and infrastructure.

They include: visitor center rehabilitation, restroom upgrades, road and trail repairs,

campground improvements, historic structure enhancements, education and visitor interpretation programs, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements and technology upgrades to improve customer services and implement state of the art reservation and trip planning services for visitors. Over the years, fee revenue has made possible over 10,000 projects to improve on-the-ground facilities, conserve natural resources, enhance recreation, expand educational opportunities and preserve our heritage.

Fees have been used for a wide variety of improvements. In Lake Havasu, Arizona, BLM manages 87 designated camp sites along 20 miles of shoreline. Most of these sites are over 30 years old and, until recently, had been poorly maintained. With the contribution of FLREA funds, old restrooms at all sites were removed and reconstructed; a free-use, two-lane watercraft launch ramp was added with new parking areas, fishing piers and picnic areas for visitors to enjoy. Additional new amenities include: cooking grills, picnic tables, shade awnings, and litter and trash pickup services. Lake Havasu has since become a very popular lake destination. Surveys and public contacts tell us visitors appreciate the significant improvements made to these sites and recognize that the fees they pay are being reinvested into the sites and facilities they use.

Fee funds are being used to rehabilitate visitor centers and for creating new exhibits at Yellowstone, Carlsbad and Mammoth Cave National Parks. In Sabino Canyon, on the Coronado National Forest, funds are being used to repair the heavily used picnic areas and visitor center. In order to help combat the mountain pine beetle epidemic, funds paid

for 2500 pheromone pouches which were distributed by volunteers throughout campgrounds on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. Wheelchair accessible tables and accessible trails are being built on the Coleville National Forest. Museum improvements at Desoto National Wildlife Refuge in Iowa are being supported by recreation fees. The National Park Service is using fee funds for a service wide initiative to upgrade all audio visual programs and assembly areas. Auditoriums will be retrofitted to comply with ADA standards. Orientation films will be captioned with assistive listening devices provided. These improvements will be made over the next two to three years for all NPS sites. At Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge a fully accessible fishing pier was added to the extremely popular Buckhall Recreation Area. The 94 foot pier now allows all visitors to fish and crab while enjoying views from the refuge.

We are continually working to improve our program. One aspect that has received increased scrutiny within the Forest Service is management of areas which receive high concentrations of visitors, termed High Impact Recreation Areas (HIRAs). Examples include the heavily used canyons surrounding Los Angeles and San Diego on the Angeles and Cleveland National Forests in Southern California. The revenues from the fees allow the Forest Service to provide security, clean restrooms, pick up trash, remove litter and graffiti, and provide visitor information and other services. Without responsible management, these areas would be degraded by excessive traffic and trash. Nevertheless, we are continuing to assess these operations from the visitors' perspective in order to ensure that the public is not paying fees where appropriate services are not present.

NPS has set aside \$4 million of fee funds per year to fund the Public Land Corp Program since 1998. This program brings students and inner city youth to the parks to work on a variety of trail and natural habitat restoration projects. At the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore students participating in this program have helped preserve the Karner Blue Butterfly habitat and restore the Mnoké Prairie and Great Marsh. Their work has included: propagation of native plants, construction of a park greenhouse, and construction of water retention structures. A trail project at Sitka National Historical Park will provide employment and education opportunities for Alaskan native youth and benefit park visitors, heritage resources and the local tribal government. The project will act as a catalyst for future related partnership agreements between the Tribe and the park, benefitting both entities.

Retention of fee authority is paramount to our ability to maintain and manage our federal lands and effectively address the deferred maintenance backlog at our National Parks, Forests and other federal lands. As visitor demand increases these efforts require a reliable and ready source of funding that allows us to respond quickly. Recreation fee revenues are a critical source of such supplemental funding.

Visitors to our federal lands are telling us that they understand that they benefit directly from the recreation fee program and are supportive. A study conducted by the University of Idaho for BLM in 2007 found that 80% of visitors believed that the fees charged were appropriate. Additionally, 84% of visitors surveyed in this study agreed or strongly agreed that the value of the recreation opportunity was at least equal to the fee charged.

Survey data collected by the Forest Service in 2006 show that 83% of visitors were satisfied with the value received for the amount paid. According to a comprehensive study completed by Northern Arizona University for the National Park Service in 2000, there is broad public support for reasonable fees on public lands. Current NPS annual survey data show over a 90% satisfaction rate for the value of entrance fee paid.

Visitors consistently comment that they are willing to pay reasonable recreation fees if they know the money will be used to improve the site they are visiting. The FLREA program provides that 80-100% of the fee revenue generated remains at the site where it was collected for maintenance and improvements. People living in New Jersey are not being asked to maintain boat ramps in Arizona that they may never visit.

Under FLREA, the public has a voice at the decision making table when fees are proposed. The law introduced public participation and civic engagement requirements for all agencies in the establishment of new fees, modifying fees and designating new fee areas.

In addition to site specific public involvement, there is the engagement of Forest Service and BLM advisory committees, collectively known as Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (R/RACs). R/RACs are composed of a diverse group of stakeholders who represent a wide range of interests, including recreation, environmental, tourism, and tribal and local government interests. They are a forum for the public to work with the Forest Service and BLM to review and provide feedback on agency proposals to establish

new recreation fees or make changes to existing fees. These committees are a model of productive partnerships.

As partners in the process, R/RACS are examining each agency fee proposal thoroughly, offering input, and helping to ensure the agencies carefully consider public concerns, issues and questions when developing proposals. To date, Forest Service and BLM agency officials have presented to the R/RACs some 410 fee proposals – representing about 6% of the 6,300 total fee sites of the two agencies. More than two-thirds of these proposals have been for modest fee increases at campgrounds managed by the two agencies.

The committees are providing a critical public perspective to the Forest Service and BLM. Their value extends beyond specific fee proposal analysis to a broader understanding of economic, social and environmental concerns. A site-specific fee proposal cannot be understood without this broader context, which leads to valuable discussions on the role of national public lands and the challenges encountered in providing outdoor recreation opportunities now and into the future. As a result of these deliberative processes, the fee proposals have ultimately received positive recommendations from the R/RACs with nine receiving recommendations for slight modifications.

The NPS, FWS and BOR also have developed extensive public involvement and civic engagement requirements as mandated by FLREA. Each agency has specific

requirements for conducting outreach to the public, key constituency groups, local government and civic organizations and Congressional representatives. This information is then used to either validate a proposed change or modified fee or to receive feedback that recommends against it. Once the vetting process is complete, new fees and rate changes must be approved at multiple levels of the agency to ensure that fees are reasonable and made according to agency policy. This public participation process is working. The NPS, for example, has been able to use public input to increase fees or keep fee rates at current levels. The NPS has ceased collecting fees at approximately five sites since FLREA was enacted.

Participating agencies make every effort to ensure that fees do not become a barrier for potential visitors. Children under the age of 16 are exempt from paying entrance and/or standard amenity fees and fee waivers are available for educational groups. Annual interagency and area specific passes offer frequent visitors an economical way to visit federal lands. Lifetime passes are available to seniors and to U.S. citizens who are permanent residents with permanent disabilities. These passes also provide the additional benefit of discounted camping.

Further promoting increased public engagement, the FLREA program provides opportunities for local entities to partner with federal agencies to develop and manage projects. At the South Fork of the Snake River in Idaho, an interagency working group was formed with local, state and federal representatives to develop a fee for 10 sites spread along a 62 mile stretch of the River. Regardless of where fees are collected, the



working group decides together where the money will be spent within the corridor to benefit their shared visitors. This effective partnership gives local stakeholders a voice in the development and management of federal recreation facilities.

One other ongoing effort by the Forest Service is the Recreation Facility Analysis Program. Under this program and with public participation, each National Forest is undertaking a comprehensive analysis of its facilities and the resources required to manage them.

To date, these analyses have identified many sites for improvement as well as a small percentage of lesser used facilities for possible decommissioning or reductions of service. Recreation Facility Analysis identifies options for management including, but not limited to fees. This process has greatly improved the ability of the agency to prioritize projects based on the needs of our visitors.

The FLREA program has contributed to seamless government and in turn, enhanced visitor service and satisfaction. Through the establishment of a single interagency “America the Beautiful – National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass” in January 2007, vacationing families can now travel between sites managed by five separate agencies using a single pass. Since the introduction of the interagency pass program, over 1 million passes have been issued to the public affording millions of visitors, their family and friends an economical way to see and experience America’s public lands.

A sightseer in Utah and Nevada can view the majestic rock formations of Bryce and Zion National Parks, explore Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area on the Ashley National Forest and hike through the BLM-managed Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area using a single pass. As access to most public lands remains free, the pass applies to those locations that currently have entrance or standard amenity fees.

The program is managed by NPS on behalf of the other participating agencies. It includes four types of passes: Annual, Senior, Access and Volunteer. The new passes cover all entrance and standard amenity fees for the pass holder and three accompanying adults at per person entry sites or all occupants in a personal vehicle at vehicle entry units. This represents a particularly cost-effective opportunity for families traveling to federal recreation sites. The \$80 Annual Pass is available to everyone and provides unlimited access to Federal recreation sites that charge entrance or standard amenity fees. The comparable pass offered by Parks Canada is about \$140. The \$10 Senior Pass is available to U.S. residents who are 62 years old and older and the Access Pass is available free of charge to U.S. residents with permanent disabilities. Both are lifetime passes and offer the pass holder additional discounts for some expanded amenity fees, such as camping. As a “thank you” to the volunteers who contribute thousands of hours to help take care of our public lands, FLREA authorized the creation of a free version of the Annual Pass available to volunteers who dedicate 500 or more service hours to improving their public lands. Interagency annual passes are now available through the internet, a toll free phone number and select third party partners. The image for the

annual passes changes every year and is picked from winning entries from the “Share the Experience” official Federal Lands Photo Contest.

The FLREA program has also been used to help meet the public’s demand for “one-stop-shopping” as they set out to explore and experience America’s public lands. In February, 2007, the E-Government initiative, Recreation One-Stop, which includes the National Recreation Reservation Service, launched its new RECREATION.gov website. The site offers the public the convenience of making reservations for more than 2,500 Federal campgrounds, day use areas, cabins and tour information facilities directly through the site or one toll-free number. RECREATION.gov also provides visitors with instant, one-stop access to maps, recreation activities, and other useful federal lands information.

Our Departments have a shared responsibility to ensure that federal lands continue to play a central role in providing recreational opportunities for the American people and visitors alike. Fulfilling this mission requires that we maintain visitor facilities and services, preserve natural and historic resources, and enhance visitor opportunities with an adequate and steady source of funding. We continue to strive to keep fees reasonable and to use the money collected to directly benefit visitor experience. The Recreation Fee Program has demonstrated a clear record of success as we strive to accomplish our mission. Recreation fee authority has been a vital component of our Departments’ ability to serve as effective stewards of the public lands we treasure. We would be happy to answer any questions.