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BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT & GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR, ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT
on IMPROVING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AT NATIONAL PARKS
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Good Morning, Chairman Farenthold and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this morning regarding the tremendous public contributions of the Forest Service’s recreation program. We are proud of the work we accomplish with our private-industry partners to provide the best possible breadth of choice and high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities for the American people.

Recreation Benefits for the American Taxpayer

The Forest Service provides a huge number of diverse recreation opportunities for the American public. Through their direct and ripple spending, recreationists who visit the National Forest Lands contribute billions to the US economy and support thousands of jobs—the vast majority of which are in gateway and rural communities. Outdoor recreation supports significant employment opportunities and offers a tremendous economic stimulus for local municipalities.

National forests also receive significant repeat visitors. More than 15 percent of total visits result from people who visit their public lands more than 50 times a year. In a recent survey, we found 7 out of 10 Americans agree that protecting our history and natural beauty through public lands like national forests is one of the things our agency does best.

“Gateway” communities provide access to public lands and visitor services to the many millions of Americans who come for outdoor recreation each year. The distinguishing feature of these towns is their proximity to public lands. The vitality of their social and economic structure often depends on management decisions on and for these public lands.

A Brief History of Recreation on the National Forest System

Visitors historically engage in recreation activities such as hiking, camping, picnicking, skiing, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, wildlife watching, visiting cultural sites and visitor centers, or just viewing the scenery and driving for pleasure. The kind of recreation the public wants today is far more diverse than in the early 1900s. In addition to the continued popularity of traditional activities like shooting, hunting and fishing, we are seeing growth in ziplining and snowboards,

ATVs and snowmobiles, rafting trips or guided backcountry trips, with gourmet meals and llamas carrying everything but your daypack.

Today our national forests host some 149 million visits, according to the 2015 National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey. Since 2009, estimates of recreation visitation have been rising by an average of about 1 million visits a year. The combination of public demand and tremendous economic contributions makes outdoor recreation one of the most pressing issues in public land management, pushing the Forest Service to seek innovative approaches in balancing the growing demand for recreation with ecosystem protection and economic pressures for further development. As the most intensive development of public lands for recreational use, ski resorts have long embodied this balance.

The National Park Service (NPS), within the Department of the Interior, and the Forest Service, within the Department of Agriculture, have different purposes and are governed by different laws, regulations, and policies, including new concessions authorities authorized in the recently passed NPS Centennial Act, related to visitor services, preservation and conservation.

Working with Partners and Permittees

The Forest Service is deeply committed to connecting all Americans to the outdoors; we value the important role played by guides and outfitters, ski areas, schools, non-profit organizations, and others as partners in linking people to recreational opportunities on national forests. Outdoor recreation supports health and wellbeing. It also attracts people to visit, live and work in gateway and rural communities, and supports the economic vitality of those communities.

We administer recreation special use permits that enable thousands of private-sector professionals to lead a range of activities on Forest Service lands, from whitewater rafting, horseback riding, and big game hunting, to youth education trips in the Wilderness, and even scenic jeep tours. For many Americans, these activities represent their first introduction to their national forests, and the outfitters and guides they use are small businesses providing jobs and income.

For example, approximately 4 million people visit the Coconino National Forest in Arizona, which surrounds the City of Sedona. Several outfitter and guide permits are issued to locally owned and operated businesses providing the public with opportunities for jeep tours, hiking guides, hot air balloon rides, four-wheeler rentals, and fishing. One specific example of an outstanding working relationship there is with *Pink Jeep Tours*. This small business provides 100 percent of the maintenance to the Broken Arrow Road, one of the most popular 4x4 routes in the area.

Meanwhile, various partnerships with permittees at the Land between the Lakes National Recreation Area have also enhanced local economies through issuance of recreation special use permits. These include unique events such as popular drag boat races, an annual rodeo averaging

1,000 visitors, and a trail that is perfect for a variety of mountain bike and running races, some with upwards of 700 participants. These partnerships between the Forest Service and its permittees contribute to the sustainable management of Land between the Lakes National Recreation Area.

The national forests also host more than 120 alpine ski areas. These facilities are privately owned and constructed by our permittee partners who provide recreation opportunities by proposing and developing sites in response to industry trends and public needs.

Four Seasons for Recreation

The Forest Service is working with ski resorts to go beyond snow seasons by enhancing year-round recreation, providing more choices for visitors and creating additional jobs around resort communities.

In 2014, the Forest Service published new recreation directives spurred by the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act of 2011, which amended the National Forest Ski Area Permit Act of 1986 to specifically allow “natural resource-based, four-season activities” – which can include such opportunities as zip lines, mountain bike terrain parks and trails, disc golf courses and rope courses. These new guidelines affect 120 ski areas on nearly 180,000 acres of public land administered by the Forest Service.

Broadening options for outdoor activities in areas that already have parking, lodging, and restaurants will likely increase public excitement for visiting national forests. This is a win-win situation – more people will be able to find jobs in communities around ski areas, and more Americans will have access to year-round fun in these beautiful and convenient settings.

Two Vail Resorts ski areas, Vail Mountain in Colorado and Heavenly Mountain Resort in California, are among the first to offer four-season action, unveiling a variety of programs and activities to connect people to summer outdoor experiences. In addition to environmental interpretation, the resorts offer tree-canopy tours, aerial adventure courses, alpine coasters, 4x4 tours and zip lines.

Our Challenges

Over 110 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt established the U.S. Forest Service to manage America’s national forests, now including national grasslands and encompassing 193 million acres, for the benefit of all Americans. Today, more Americans benefit from recreation use than any time in our history, and we’re working to expand how we serve businesses and the public by improving the permitting process.

The Forest Service is working to eliminate redundant processes, simplify forms, improve external and internal communication, improve financial management through the simplification

of fees, and increase permitting efficiency through the simplification of the environmental analysis process for uses of a continuing or routine nature.

Responding to the expectations of the businesses we work with and the public we serve, the Forest Service has implemented an agreement with the contemporary digital services group at General Services Administration's 18F for development of an ePermit System. We will soon offer a more convenient way for the public to apply for special use authorizations via an on-line application process.

The Forest Service continues to collaborate with other agencies to explore interagency functionality for the ePermit System. The Forest Service is also working to improve and enhance the Special Uses Data System, the Forest Service database which tracks and maintains all special use permit information, nationwide.

Line officers have discretion to waive the special use authorization requirement for proposed uses on a case-by-case basis. Proposed uses in some situations may have little or no impact on National Forest System lands, resources, or programs. In considering whether a nominal effects determination is appropriate, Forest Service guidance stresses that officers should allow activities that will have little impact on the land to move forward without undue process.

A national Campground and Day-Use Concession Review was conducted in early Fiscal Year 2017, a first of its kind from conception of the concession program back in the 1980's. The goal of the review is to enhance public-private ventures and agency business practices that promote true partnerships, and identify shortfalls in agency policies and procedures.

Special uses remains the primary economic driver of the agency in terms of both receipts to the government and national/local economic activity. Modernizing the special uses program will create a more predictable business environment and a more efficient workforce. Modernization accomplishes this by improving our core business tools, reducing environmental analysis, and promoting partnerships to maintain and operate trails and facilities.

The Forest Service has also established special "strike teams" to take on the challenge of bringing thousands of expired special use permits up to date. In Fiscal Year 2016, these teams successfully addressed and resolved 3,449 expired special use authorizations, resulting in a 31 percent decrease in the number of expired authorizations.

Conclusion

Managing for sustainable recreation on the national forests means providing opportunities for small businesses, such as restaurants, motels, and other tourism-related enterprises in gateway communities. It means sustaining current businesses and jobs and helping new ones get started.

It helps connect people to nature, and it encourages outdoor activities that promote physical and mental health. It helps Americans understand their natural and cultural environments, and it helps engage them in the stewardship of the natural world. It brings the next generation into the fold, giving them opportunities to contribute to their public lands and develop lifelong land ethics.

We know the benefits of outdoor recreational experiences on physical and mental health. We know the demand for access to outdoor settings and outdoor recreational experiences are increasing at a rapid pace, and we know that federal land and water management agencies, assisted by partners and service providers, host a wide and diverse array of outdoor recreation opportunities. Outdoor recreation is an essential part of American culture.

Thousands of rural and urban communities benefit from recreation on federal lands. When Americans play outside during outings or overnight trips, their spending directly supports outdoor-oriented industries such as outfitting and guiding, lodging, and concessions, many of which are small businesses.

Supporting recreation requires us to restore and maintain healthy resilient forests. To sustain the recreation economy, we need to have the healthy landscapes that provide the recreational experiences that the public expects and demands. Our work to restore and maintain healthy forests and grasslands is an essential part of our recreation program.

The Forest Service remains committed to serving the American public through common-sense cooperation with the businesses who drive the enormous diversity of recreation opportunities on America's national forests.