

**STATEMENT OF CHRIS FRENCH  
DEPUTY CHIEF, NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
FOREST SERVICE  
Before the  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
FEDERAL LANDS SUBCOMMITTEE  
Regarding  
H.R. 3458 – RECREATION NOT RED TAPE ACT and H.R. 3879 – SIMPLIFYING  
OUTDOOR ACCESS FOR RECREATION ACT  
September 19, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service, to provide views on H.R. 3458, the Recreation Not Red Tape Act and H.R. 3879, the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation Act, or ‘SOAR Act’.

The Forest Service is deeply committed to connecting all Americans to the outdoors, and we value the important role played by guides and outfitters, resorts, schools, non-profit organizations, and others as partners in connecting people to recreational opportunities on national forests and grasslands. Outdoor recreation attracts people to visit, live and work near National Forests in gateway and rural communities, and supports the health, wellbeing and economic vitality of those communities. Recreation on the National Forest System contributes over \$11 billion to the Nation’s gross domestic product and supports more than 148,000 full and part-time jobs<sup>1</sup>.

USDA supports the overall goals of H.R. 3458 and 3879 to improve recreational access on National Forest System land and looks forward to working with the Subcommittee and the bills’ sponsors to ensure these bills achieve their goals. Our comments pertain to the effect of these bills on the Forest Service and management of National Forest System land. USDA defers to DOI on the effects of these bills on DOI agencies and the lands under their jurisdiction.

Title I of H.R. 3458 and all of H.R. 3879 reaffirms the need to expedite and streamline the issuance of special use permits, including those for outfitters and guides and recreation events. There are currently 6,035 expired permits, which is about 50% fewer expired permits than existed just 3 years ago. USDA strongly supports the goal of continuing towards eliminating the backlog of permits and expediting processing.

The Forest Service has been working diligently to implement efforts to modernize our recreation special uses program including developing an ePermit platform that has been piloted across the

---

<sup>1</sup> 2018 National Visitor Use Monitoring survey. These are total effects (direct+indirect+induced).

Nation; update our special uses database system; and make significant progress to reduce the backlog of expired recreation special use permits through the use of targeted strike teams. Additionally, the Agency's proposed NEPA regulations contain several key tools that will help speed the permitting process, such as permitting specific categorical exclusions. With this knowledge, we would like to work with the Subcommittee to ensure that the bill language aligns with these advances and lessons learned. This includes implementation of the concept of a "cross-jurisdictional" special use permit.

The Forest Service supports the goal of improving the availability, convenience, and versatility of federal recreational lands passes as provided in Sections 111 and 112 of H.R. 3458, and would like to work with the Subcommittee to adjust the language to ensure the goals of the legislation are met. Currently, the Annual Interagency Pass, as well as numerous local and site-specific passes, can be purchased online at [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). The Senior, Access, and other recreational lands passes can be purchased or acquired online at [Store.USGS.gov](https://store.usgs.gov).

The goal in Title II of H.R. 3458 of encouraging service member and veteran access to the outdoors is firmly aligned with the Forest Service mission. Research shows that outdoor recreation contributes to both physical and mental health including lowering blood pressure, boosting immunity, and improving concentration. As health care providers continue to focus on preventative activities and lifestyles, we believe that our National Forests and Grasslands will play an increasingly important role in enhancing community wellness.

Given the growing recognition of the importance of the outdoor recreation economy, both to the national GDP and to the vitality of gateway and rural communities, the goal in Title III of H.R. 3458 of making recreation a priority is timely and relevant to our National Forests and Grasslands.

The Forest Service manages 22 National Recreation Areas that draw visitors from across the Nation and from around the world. The economic benefits manifest as both jobs and revenue to local, state, and regional economies. National Recreation Areas also contribute to the sense of place and quality of life for local residents and communities. There are extensive investment needs to address deferred maintenance backlogs on existing Forest Service assets. We share the goal of supporting recreational opportunities on National Forest System lands but would like to work with the Subcommittee and the bill's sponsors to ensure the necessary skill sets and capacity are available and strategically placed.

USDA fully supports the intent of Section 401 of H.R. 3458 to promote volunteerism and service to enhance stewardship, recreation access, and sustainability of the resources, values, and facilities of Forest Service units. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC) is helping the Forest Service expand opportunities for young people and Veterans to work and learn on Forest units. The work of 21CSC with returning veterans and young people strengthens America's infrastructure, boosts local economies and multiplies returns on our country's most

valuable assets – its unmatched landscapes and people. Increased emphasis on Veteran engagement is an agency priority. Established volunteerism and service goals align well with the objectives outlined in the bill.

USDA supports the intent of Section 411 of H.R. 3458 to work toward ensuring increased coordination and consistency in the management and maintenance of trails crossing jurisdictional boundaries. The Forest Service believes that incorporating and applying standard management tools such as Trail Management Objectives and working collaboratively through the interagency National Trails Council to implement Section 411 of H.R. 3458 would be an effective means for accomplishing this intent.

We again thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide this statement and look forward to working together on targeted amendments to improve the effect of these important bills.