



**COUNCIL *for*  
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AGAINST  
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**Council for Citizens Against Government Waste**

**Statement for the Record**

**on**

**H.R. 4236, Reducing Waste in National Parks Act**

**Natural Resources Subcommittee on  
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

**February 27, 2020**

**Thomas Schatz  
President**

On behalf of the Council for Citizens Against Government Waste (CCAGW), I am pleased to submit this written testimony regarding H.R. 4236, “Reducing Waste in National Parks Act.”

CCAGW was founded in 1984 by the late industrialist J. Peter Grace and nationally syndicated columnist Jack Anderson to build support for implementation of President Ronald Reagan’s Grace Commission recommendations and other waste-cutting proposals. Since its inception, CCAGW has been at the forefront of the fight for efficiency and accountability in government. CCAGW has more than one million members and supporters nationwide, and, over the past 35 years, the organization has helped save taxpayers \$1.3 trillion through the implementation of Grace Commission findings and other recommendations. CCAGW does not accept government funds. The organization’s mission reflects the interests of taxpayers and covers a wide variety of issues.

H.R. 4236, the “Reducing Waste in National Parks Act,” seeks to restore a ban on the sale of bottled water in the national parks, reinstating an unwise and foolish policy. While the bill states it is for a “program for recycling and reduction of disposable plastic bottles in units of the NPS,” it is entirely focused on banning bottled water, while alternatives, like soda and juice, can continue to be sold. It codifies the National Park Service Memorandum 11-03, which was issued on January 14, 2011. The procedures contained in that memorandum were ineffective and wasteful at the parks that instituted a ban on bottled water. The Trump administration wisely reversed the ban in August 2017.<sup>i</sup>

Memorandum 11-03 implemented a voluntary disposable plastic water bottle recycling and reduction policy. Parks were strongly encouraged to create a robust recycling system, with ample and well-designed collection facilities. Visitors were supposed to be educated on the environmental impact of purchasing disposable plastic water bottles and substitute them for reasonably priced reusable bottles, which could be refilled at water fountains or refill stations. The plan also permitted, on a park-by-park basis, the option for park superintendents to eliminate the sales of bottled water, following an extensive review and prior approval from their regional director.

To ban the sale of water in disposable plastic bottles, the NPS park superintendents had to analyze and address 14 factors, including calculating the amount of waste that would be eliminated by instituting a ban on the sale of bottled water; and the pros and cons to overall park operations; infrastructure costs and funding sources for water filling stations; the operational costs of maintaining and public health testing of the filling stations; and, safety considerations for visitors who may not carry enough drinking water into the park or utilize surface water sources with the potential of exposure to disease. The last factor has serious health consequences, particularly for anyone who is unaware of the ban and takes a long hike on a hot day only to find himself or herself at a facility that does not sell bottled water.

In 2016, Citizens Against Government Waste (CAGW) expressed its concern that the national parks were wasting tax dollars and creating a potentially dangerous situation for visitors by banning the sale of water sold in plastic bottles. CAGW noted that while the parks could ban the sale of plastic water bottles, a healthy choice, there was no such ban for other products also sold in plastic bottles, such as soda or juice.<sup>ii</sup>

On March 2, 2016, CAGW submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to then-Department of the Interior Secretary Sally Jewell for the data that would justify and support the ban on bottled water. Accurate information on the number of parks that implemented the ban was needed because different results were provided by the NPS website, NPS written testimony, and news reports.<sup>iii</sup>

CAGW asked for copies of all the written analyses and how issues concerning the 14 factors would be addressed by the parks before a ban on the sale of bottled water would have been allowed to be implemented.

CAGW also asked for other records, including all bottled beverage waste from two years prior to an individual park's ban on the sale of bottled water and since banning the sale of disposable bottled water went into effect by weight and, if available, by type of container like plastic, glass, and aluminum to determine how the ban was working. CAGW asked for records on plastic disposable bottles being recycled; infrastructure costs and funding source(s) for all of the filling stations in each park that were operational since the ban went into effect; and contractual costs of water filling stations in each park, including utilities and regular public health testing.

In spite of repeated written communications for several months with a NPS FOIA officer, CAGW never received any substantial information that would have fulfilled the obligation required in the 2011 memorandum to develop "a system for annual evaluation of the program, including public response, visitor satisfaction, buying behavior, public safety, and plastic collection rates."

Congress held several hearings in 2016 on the recycling and banning disposable water bottle issue. On June 14, 2016, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a hearing on the national parks with NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis as a witness. Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Mich.) asked Director Jarvis if the ban on plastic water bottles had reduced garbage in the national parks and his answer was "Yes, with certainty, absolutely" and that the parks "collect data on our solid waste management, I don't have that in front of me, but I would be glad to get back to you specifically on the reduction of waste in the waste stream."

The committee sent nine "Questions for the Record" to NPS Director Jarvis. Among the questions asked was to "provide all data or other information concerning the reduction of waste due to the ban on plastic bottled water sales in national parks. Specifically, please include all data regarding reduced waste, disposal costs, and recycling." On September 12, 2016 the NPS sent its answer to the committee, which included the following comments:

The NPS has implemented a voluntary plastic water bottle reduction program in 23 parks using a rigorous process to determine the appropriateness of this policy. The NPS makes available unlimited drinking water at these locations as a condition of the policy and visitors can bring any plastic water bottles to the park. We encourage refilling these containers.

Due to the complexity of the NPS solid waste stream, the bureau cannot easily measure the reduction in the waste stream associated with the disposable plastic water bottle sales

eliminations. However, there are other environmental benefits that can be achieved via this policy. These benefits include introducing visitors to environmentally responsible purchasing, eliminating greenhouse gas pollution at all phases of disposable plastic water bottle production and transport, and free access to drinking water for our visitors (requiring only a refillable container).

Going forward, the NPS said they would evaluate the effectiveness of the policy by calculating how many water bottle sales were eliminated, which would require getting historic data from park concessioners.

The Trump administration revoked the ban on August 16, 2017. Of the 417 national parks, only 23 had implemented the policy. The announcement stated, “The ban removed the healthiest beverage choice at a variety of parks while still allowing sales of bottled sweetened drinks. The change in policy comes after a review of the policy’s aims and impact in close consultation with Department of the Interior leadership.” Then-Acting NPS Director Michael Reynolds said, “While we will continue to encourage the use of free water bottle filling stations as appropriate, ultimately it should be up to our visitors to decide how best to keep themselves and their families hydrated during a visit to a national park, particularly during hot summer visitation periods.”<sup>iv</sup>

CCAGW urges the committee to reject H.R. 4236 and continue to allow bottled water to be sold in every national park. Like many other well-intended but ineffective government policies, there is a very easy way to negate the impact of the ban. Astute stores just outside of the national parks can inform customers that no bottled water could be purchased within the parks and sell bottled water to visitors who can bring them into the park, usurping the supposed purpose of the ban.

The NPS should continue to educate visitors on the importance of not littering, encourage the use of recycling containers, and provide, where practical, free potable water stations. Congress should not force our national parks to implement another foolish and dangerous ban on the sale of bottled water.

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<sup>i</sup> National Park Service (NPS); Memorandum 11-03; Recycling and Reduction of Disposable Plastic Bottles in Parks; December 14, 2001;

<https://www.cagw.org/sites/default/files/pdf/FOIA%20Request%20NPS%20Bottled%20Water.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> CAGW, “The National Park Service’s ‘Silly’ Ban on Bottled Water;” *The Hill*; March 11, 2016;

<https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/energy-environment/272644-the-national-park-services-silly-ban-on-bottled-water>

<sup>iii</sup> CAGW; FOIA Request to Interior Secretary Sally Jewel; March 2, 2016;

<https://www.cagw.org/sites/default/files/pdf/FOIA%20Request%20NPS%20Bottled%20Water.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> NPS; National Park Service Ends Effort to Eliminate Sale of Disposable Water Bottles; August 16, 2017,

<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/08-16-2017-water-bottles.htm>