

Opening Statement for Ranking Member Russ Fulcher
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Legislative Hearing on 5 bills: H.R. 3132 (Rep. Amodei), the Lake Tahoe Restoration Reauthorization Act; H.R. 2049 (Rep. Panetta), the Repairing Existing Land by Adding Necessary Trees (REPLANT) Act; H.R. 2816 (Rep. Schrier), the Legacy Roads and Trails Act; H.R. 3211 (Rep. Neguse), the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Act; H.R. 4300 (Rep. Miller-Meeks), the Veterans in Parks (VIP) Act

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Today we meet to discuss a variety of bills ranging from restoration of the Tahoe Basin to hazardous fuels reduction work conducted by the Forest Service and NRCS.

While most of the bills being considered during today's hearing deal in some manner with the Forest Service, none of the bills would actually give the Forest Service any new tools to improve forest management and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Our country is currently at preparedness level 4 for wildfire threats and it is critical that any discussion about the Forest Service is focused on new authorities and streamlining needed to get our catastrophic wildfire problem under control.

With that being said, I would like to highlight one bipartisan piece of legislation that is being considered today that reflects the type of lasting good that is achievable when we work together. This bill, the

Veterans in Parks Act, is not only cosponsored by myself and Chairman Neguse, it is also cosponsored by Ranking Member Westerman and Chairman Grijalva. It's not every day that you can get all four of us to agree on a particular bill, which I think highlights just how special this piece of legislation is.

This month is National Parks Month, a time for every American to get out and enjoy our iconic national treasures. From the majestic geysers of Yellowstone National Park to the awe-inspiring Yosemite Valley, our national parks have something for everybody. But we must never forget the brave men and women who have fought to protect these lands and our country. Their sacrifices have ensured our freedom and the continued protection of our nation.

While we can never fully repay the debt owed to them for their service to this country, the VIP Act is a small gesture that will ensure that no military servicemember, veteran, or member of a Gold Star Family ever pays to access our national parks or public lands again. This bill provides free lifetime passes to veterans and Gold Star Family members to access over 2,000 recreation sites across the nation and free

annual passes for active-duty military personnel. Our military and veterans' passes have never been codified and this bill is an important step in ensuring these benefits are permanently protected for our American heroes.

The bill, which currently has 143 bipartisan cosponsors, is also supported by 60 organizations representing a diverse coalition of recreational, veterans', and sportsmen's interests. We have received several letters of support for the bill and I'd like to submit two of them for the record right now from the Outdoor Industry Association and Backcountry Hunters & Anglers.

I'd like to commend my colleague from Iowa, Congresswoman Mariannette Miller-Meeks, for her leadership on this bipartisan bill. A veteran herself, she understands the value that our public lands hold for veterans, particularly those wounded in combat. I'm also pleased that one of her constituents, retired Army Captain John Paluska, is with us here today to testify in support of this legislation. Captain Paluska is a decorated veteran who honorably served our nation for 15 years, serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan theaters across numerous combat

deployments. Wounded in a roadside bomb attack, Captain Paluska was also awarded a Purple Heart. It is an honor to have you here today, sir, and I look forward to hearing your perspective on how time spent on public lands aided your recovery and also how the VIP Act can make it possible for all veterans and Gold Star families to enjoy these wonderful lands. I'd also like to congratulate you on the birth of your first son, Finn, who was born just a few days ago.

Thank you to all the witnesses being here today, and I yield back the balance.