

**Statement of Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks
before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

July 13, 2021

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here and testify today about my bill, H.R. 4300, the Veterans in Parks or VIP Act. I was so proud to introduce this overwhelmingly bipartisan legislation with a fellow veteran, and a member of the Natural Resources Committee, Congressman Gallego. Since the bill's introduction, we have gained the support of more than 140 of our colleagues on both sides of the aisle and over 50 organizations.

Our commonsense legislation would give servicemembers, veterans, and our Gold Star families free passes to all of our beautiful national parks and federal lands for life. This is a reasonable piece of legislation that will support those who sacrifice so much for our freedoms.

Our nation is blessed to have some of the most beautiful national parks and public lands. Each year millions of Americans access the more than 2,000 federal recreation areas, including national parks, national forests, and wildlife refuges. This includes some of the country's most iconic natural treasures, from Acadia National Park in Maine and the Dry Tortugas in Florida to the Redwood National Forest in California and the Gates of the Arctic in Alaska.

In 2020, the America the Beautiful annual pass became free for veterans and Gold Star Families; however, this change for veterans has never been put into law and could be undone in future years. The VIP Act protects these veterans passes by codifying them into law and making them lifetime passes instead of annual passes that would have to be resent every year. Making the passes lifetime instead of annual makes the job of the Park Service easier, and ensures our veterans have full access to all the benefits they deserve. Finally, the VIP Act also creates annual passes for current servicemembers, which can be converted into lifetime passes once they retire.

From sea to shining sea, we are a nation of incredible beauty and biodiversity. Congress recognizes the mental and physical health benefits of outdoor recreation for current servicemembers and veterans.

As a 24-year Army veteran, I understand the sacrifices made by our military and their loved ones and believe we must do whatever we can to honor these VIP's. The VIP Act provides these Americans with free access to land they have sacrificed to defend.

Our national parks are for all of us. Getting outside into nature and enjoying our beautiful country provides an outlet and escape with mental and physical benefits.

No one is more worthy of experiencing open access to these incredible places than the men and women who fought to keep us free and the families who made the ultimate sacrifice. Unfortunately, it is often all too easy to pay lip service to the military's sacrifice but then not follow through with action to recognize their service. We can never fully repay our veterans for their service and sacrifice, but we want to show our gratitude by giving them lifetime access to America's most beautiful natural landscapes.