



Written statement of

The Honorable Randy Brodehl
County Commissioner
Flathead County, Montana

On behalf of the National Association of Counties

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
H.R. 3200, the Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act

September 19, 2023

**Testimony of the Honorable Randy Brodehl, Commissioner, Flathead County, Montana
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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and members of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands, thank you for holding this hearing to discuss legislation to support gateway communities and enhance recreation on public lands.

My name is Randy Brodehl, and I have been a Flathead County, Montana Commissioner since 2019. I previously served in the Montana House of Representatives and as Chief of the Kalispell, Montana Fire Department. I offer my testimony today on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo).

Flathead County is located in northwest Montana on the border with Canada. We have a population of 120,000 people and serve as a gateway to three national forests, a national wildlife refuge, the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, two national wildernesses, and Glacier National Park. Recreational access to these federal lands is the primary economic driver in Flathead County.

Impacts of increased visitation to gateway communities

Visitations to federal lands have exploded in recent years. Glacier National Park alone has seen approximately three million visitors annually since 2017, apart from 2020, when the Park was temporarily closed due to the covid pandemic. While this has led to needed, rapid economic growth in Flathead County, there are significant drawbacks to our population increasing to several times our number of residents for a few months out of the year.

Three years ago, Glacier National Park, under direction of the U.S. Department of the Interior, implemented a reservation permit system for the Going-to-the-Sun Road, the only road that goes all the way through the Park. This reduced visitation by half a million people in 2022. This year the Park chose to further restrict visitation by requiring permits for vehicles coming into every entrance of the Park. While the numbers impacted are not yet available, it will be significant and likely more than last year. The financial impacts are not felt by the National Park Service but are an incredible loss to our communities where tourism is king. Park Superintendents do not respond to the needs of gateway communities, so losses attributed to decisions made by the National Park Service are ignored.

Like the rest of the counties surrounding national parks, we are a tourism-based community, so when the federal government pushes down on our gateway communities, we can suffer millions of dollars in economic losses. H.R. 3200, the Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act, is in response to this and requires Superintendents of affected national parks to conduct public meetings, consult local stakeholders, and allow for public comment.

When visitors are not lucky enough to get one of the coveted park entry permits, it is typical for them to spend time and tourism dollars recreating in our gateway communities. Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, is a massive tourism draw. An unanticipated domino effect to the Park's ticketing system became exceedingly apparent this year and left our community reeling when the Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) changed Flathead Lake water level policy without consideration of

the impacts to the economies of lake communities. The Bureau chose to not release enough water to keep Flathead Lake at full capacity, letting it drop 30 inches by mid-summer, exposing the lake bottom and closing marinas, stranding boats, and exposing irrigation pump intakes. This is something they have never done in the 50 years they have been managing the lake level by release of reservoir waters above the lake. With federal lands and water access being curtailed, our visitor numbers faded, doing significant harm to our economy, and discouraging future tourism. All of this was done without seeking public or local government input. Without the Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act, we are destined to repeat this devastating action every year because county and state officials do not have a seat at the federal decision-making table.

Flathead County's access to U.S. Forest Service lands, wilderness areas, and National Wildlife Refuge lands has remained virtually the same for the past 60 years, while tourism due to our local federal lands' attractions have quadrupled. The Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act will support expansion of recreational enhancements in our gateway communities by considering more options and actions like maintaining water levels, adding campgrounds, opening roads in our forests, trails in our wilderness areas, greater access to our wildlife refuge, and educating our visitors about more options in gateway communities. The Act will give counties a seat at the table and let us help with best practice decisions.

H.R. 3200, The Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act

Congress should ensure the public has access to their lands and partner with counties and stakeholders to lessen the burden of increased visitations on communities. H.R. 3200 would help meet these goals. Counties appreciate Congressman Ryan Zinke and Senator Steve Daines for introducing this bipartisan legislation and encourage Congress to swiftly pass it to provide needed support to federal lands gateway counties throughout the country, especially in the West.

First, the bill requires the U.S. Department of the Interior to collaborate with counties, states, Tribes and various stakeholders to identify the needs of gateway communities in affordable housing, infrastructure maintenance and visitor accommodations. The Department would be allowed to provide technical or financial assistance, issue leases or rights-of-way and special use permits to meet community needs in these areas. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture would be allowed to provide similar assistance to businesses like hotels, campgrounds and restaurants. These new authorities will create the crucial partnerships that bring visitors back to federal lands and grow the economies of gateway communities in a sustainable manner.

H.R. 3200 would create a digital version of the America the Beautiful public lands pass so visitors can more easily access federal lands of all kinds. This will help to reduce wait times at visitor centers and entry gates, including during the summer tourist season. The bill would also establish a pilot program in consultation with gateway communities to provide real-time visitation data and help to drive people to lesser-known recreation sites, which will also reduce wait times and decrease the pressure on the most visited places in our public lands system, like Glacier National Park.

Conclusion

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to tell Flathead County's story. Counties urge Congress to enact policies to help gateway communities adjust to the rapid increase in visitations to federal lands. We urge Congress to adopt H.R. 3200 expeditiously. I look forward to your questions.