

Statement for the Record from Taldi Harrison

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Submitted to the House Natural Resources Committee

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Hearing on Oversight: Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks
December 6, 2022

On behalf of REI Co-op, I want to thank the Subcommittee for its recent hearing on overcrowding in our National Parks and the pursuit of commonsense solutions.

As you may know, REI Co-op is an 85-year-old member co-op and retailer of outdoor gear and apparel. Since our founding in 1938, we have grown to more than 185 stores across 42 states and the District of Columbia, a robust online retail platform and more than 22 million co-op members nationwide. We also provide classes, outings and travel adventure to hundreds of thousands of Americans every year, with many adventures occurring in the nation's iconic parks. Our mission is to awaken in people a lifelong love of the outdoors and help them enjoy the many benefits of time in nature – irrespective of their backgrounds.

The America's Outdoor Recreation Act includes solutions to challenges facing the outdoors that will both expand outdoor access and address the overcrowding issue. REI supports passing this bill this year and is committed to working with your committee next year to think through additional solutions that address evolving problems facing the outdoors.

We spend a great deal of time considering how to ensure visitors to National Parks and all public lands have the best experiences possible. At the onset of the COVID pandemic, REI spearheaded the creation of a "Recreate Responsibility" movement (see <http://www.recreateresponsibly.org>). Starting in Washington State and expanding to encompass 1600 stakeholder organizations across states as well as at a national level, our goal is to clarify and amplify guidance for how to safely spend time outdoors. We have doubled down on generating resources for local parks so that everyone can enjoy the benefits of the outdoors without traveling far from home and, as a result, helping disperse usage across many public spaces.

Overcrowding in parks is not a new issue, but the pandemic both expanded and exacerbated overuse trends. We know that overcrowding endangers lives and ecosystems and puts historical and recreation assets at risk. In partnership with organizations and stakeholders across the country, we have identified several solutions for addressing these problems and we would be happy to talk about them further with the Subcommittee and its staff. These include:

- **Focus on data collection to better understand visitation numbers and trends.** Having a deep understanding of where visitors congregate and where there are available open spaces will help agencies and your committee develop an informed strategy that stewards park assets while creating a better outdoor experience for everyone involved.

- **Partner with the outdoor recreation community to advertise and educate visitors about less crowded places.** Each of REI's 185 stores has staff prepared to advise customers on their next outdoor adventure. In our own business, we host outings and adventure travel and have adapted to focus on less crowded public spaces without lessening the experience. While we already partner with the National Park Service, we believe a broader range of partners could do more to advise visitors on less-crowded places.
- **Open Recreation.gov to third party platforms.** We also believe that making recreation.gov more flexible so that websites like REI's can allow bookings and reservations will shrink the education and access gap for enabling folks to get outside and enjoy our public lands.
- **Invest in broadband in national parks, particularly in parking lots and congregating areas.** Greater access to Wi-Fi in places where people already congregate will open opportunities for fee collecting, more timely alerts on traffic jams, greater data collection, and ultimately support visitors in seeking less crowded areas of parks. All of these technological upgrades require consistent broadband in remote areas.
- **Give FICOR the tools it needs to succeed.** The more federal agencies can work together to share information and resources, the better off recreationists will be. We are supportive of efforts to help agencies communicate and collaborate with one another about modernizing the visitor experience. There are beautiful lands, waters and facilities outside the National Park System and we can all do more to share and help distribute demand for time outside across those other places.

We also stress the importance of equitable access to our National Parks. While we believe investment in local parks are critical for everyone to reap the benefits of the outdoors, we also want to ensure that legislative solutions do not unintentionally deprive visitors of a long-planned trip to one of our more popular places. Policies like the Every Kid Outdoors Act help expand access to fourth graders who might not otherwise have an opportunity to see one of our country's natural wonders and we want to make sure programs like these continue to thrive.

We appreciate your focus on this important issue and look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure everyone can to enjoy our National Parks, in perpetuity.