

Statement of Representative Pete Stauber

H.R. 1475, *Letting Outdoor Tourism Thrive for Every Recreation Yearly (LOTTERY) Act*

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands, Natural Resources Committee

July 10, 2019

Thank you Chairwoman Haaland and Ranking Member Young for allowing me the opportunity to testify on H.R. 1475, the LOTTERY Act. Although the economy in Minnesota's Eighth is dominated by the reliant development of resources like mining and timber, these industries exist in harmony with tourism. One of the National Forests in my district contains the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, a wilderness known for multiple use and recreation.

Let me begin with a little background. Let's say you and your family would like to come to northern Minnesota for a weekend of fishing walleye on Moose or Basswood Lake, two of the prominent lakes within the BWCA. You would call an outfitter in the area registered with our local Forest Service as a "cooperator" to set you up with a permit to operate a small motorized boat on that lake ahead of time.

The BWCA permitting process is unique and complex on Recreation.gov. You must choose from more than 30 entry points, enter the size of your party, whether you want to use a motorboat or paddle-only, etcetera. This is a difficult and complex system.

Outdoor enthusiasts rely on their cooperators to navigate this system for them. The cooperator enters all information prior to January 30th. I know myself I have relied on our outfitters to help me receive a permit for a trip to the BWCA with my family of six.

When 10 AM on January 30th hits, the lottery system on recreation.gov would allocate permits in a random and fair manner. It was an imperfect system, but it allowed everyone a fair playing field to receive permits for their customers.

This year, the Forest Service arbitrarily altered the system from a lottery system to a "first-come, first-serve system." Instead of allowing folks to sign up for their desired permits ahead of time, cooperators and individuals now had to all simultaneously log onto recreation.gov at 10 AM on January 30th.

This year, my office was inundated with calls from outdoor enthusiasts and Forest Service cooperators upset about recreation.gov crashing minutes into its “go-live time.” Only about 1,400 of the tens of thousands of available permits were allocated. To compound the issue, rural broadband access is difficult in my district.

With temperatures reaching as low as 71-below zero in Ely this past year, folks had to invest time and money to drive more than 200 miles in record cold temperatures to the Twin Cities for reliable internet, only to have the system crash.

Within days, I spoke with Associate Chief Lenise Lago and Chief Vicki Christiansen of the Forest Service. Both insisted the first-come first-served system will work when recreation.gov goes live again.

About a month later, cooperators and individuals seeking to use the BWCA again drove down to the Twin Cities in brutally cold temperatures to access reliable broadband so they could attempt to get permits, only to have the launch delayed again. At this point, outfitters in my district were hemorrhaging money. One of my constituents who is a cooperator estimated they had already lost about \$15,000 in income for their small business for the summer ahead.

Therefore, I listened to my constituents and introduced the LOTTERY Act in late February. As you can see, it simply directs the Secretary of Agriculture to return to the lottery system that worked for the BWCA on recreation.gov. I introduced this bill after holding multiple roundtables and listening sessions in the area, ensuring cooperators and outdoor enthusiasts were able to offer input.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions, so we can move this bill forward and provide a meaningful fix to this broken system.