

Testimony of Richard J. Dolesh
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Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
"Paying to Play: Implementation of Fee Authority on Federal Public Lands"
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittees. My name is Richard Dolesh. I am the Senior Director of Public Policy for the National Recreation and Park Association. I thank you for the invitation to present testimony on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and issues related to charging of fees for access and use of federal public lands.

By way of background, I have worked for 35 years in parks, recreation, and natural resources management, beginning with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, then with the State of Maryland Department of Natural Resources and most recently with the National Recreation and Park Association where I have been the Director of Public Policy since 2005.

NRPA is a national non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to advancing parks, recreation, and conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people. NRPA's network of more than 21,000 citizen and professional members represents public parks and recreation agencies at all levels of government. Most of NRPA's members come from local, urban, county, regional, and state park systems. NRPA's mission is to encourage the promotion of healthy lifestyles, to seek quality recreation opportunities for all Americans, and to promote the conservation of our nation's natural and cultural resources.

The National Recreation and Park Association has had a long interest in the establishment and collection of fee charges for access to and the use of parks and public lands. NRPA and its predecessor organizations have been in existence for over 100 years, beginning with the establishment of the New England Association of Park Superintendent in 1898. NRPA was preceded by the American Institute of Park Executives established in 1921. In the 1960's, the National Recreation Association joined with the National Conference on State Parks and other organizations to form the modern NRPA.

NRPA has had a long association with the tradition of fee charges for specialized recreational uses within parks and a solid understanding of the purpose and principles guiding fee charges for public use. In fact, many of the guiding principles for fee charges first in the LWCF authorizing legislation and then in Fee Demo and FLREA came from applications in local, urban, county, regional, and state parks.

I would like to make several comments generally about the application of fees for the use and access to public lands, and then a few comments about application under FLREA.

NRPA and its members generally support the concept of fee charges for public land

and parks for special uses and specialized users. We believe the public generally supports such fee charges if they are reasonable, understood as providing special access for special users, and that a portion of the fees goes back to the public lands units that generate the fees.

I would like to note that although virtually all the state park systems now charge "entrance fees" there is less general public understanding and acceptance of such "entrance fees." This is a key consideration in the oversight of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, namely the public understanding and acceptance of why the fees are being charged, where they are applied, to whom, and what is done with the revenue.

As Fee Demo and now FLREA has shown in many instances, there are major inconsistencies of management of these fee charges and application of how the fees are charged.

Speaking from the point of view of the members of our national organization which broadly represents a cross section of the American public and the entire system of parks and recreation in America, there are a few key points I would like to make about the public's perception and understanding of the fees charged for federal public land.

First, we are constantly reminded that the public generally does not know--or care--which agency owns and manages the land. Often they don't know whether the public lands units are part of the federal government or the state or the local government. They merely want to have quality recreational experiences on our nation's public lands themselves and with their families in the least restrictive and most enjoyable way they can. The implication for FLREA and the application of fees for federal lands is that all federal agency land managers need to give top priority to creating and maintaining a seamless system that does not confuse or alienate the public, and which makes it affordable and even welcoming for the public to enjoy their public lands.

As I said, we believe that most people support the principle of paying a fee charge for specialized facilities within public lands that they are using such as campgrounds, boat ramps and other amenities that truly are extra or special with the understanding that much of their fee charges support the operation and maintenance and upgrading of such facilities.

Many people find it very difficult to understand and support paying for entrance or access to public lands in which they intend no special use. Also, they have a hard time understanding and accepting that they are being charged an extra fee if the site provides a place to sit, a bathroom, or a parking space. It is also difficult for the public to accept the "layering" of additional fees or the multiple charges by different agencies as federal unit land boundaries are crossed. These are issues that we encourage you to look at frankly as you conduct your oversight into the provisions and application of this Act.

We note that the budgetary pressures on the federal land managing agencies are crushing. As you know, we have been before you many times earnestly advocating for adequate appropriations and sufficient funds for operations, maintenance, and programming. We ask you to recognize that some of the agencies and units are so

under funded that they cannot complete their basic mission of providing free, quality recreational experiences on our nation's public lands to the American public.

We ask you to also consider the that some of the reasons for justifying fee charges to federal public lands must be balanced with other important national priorities to improve the "health and vitality" of our citizens as called for in the original Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. We ask you to question whether some of the policies justifying fee charges and fee increases are inhibiting or even preventing some of the very public who are in most need of healthful, outdoor recreational opportunities.

We note and ask that you give special consideration to urban populations and minority communities who are often at the greatest risk of chronic disease and obesity. Are federal lands fee policies truly making our public lands more available and accessible to these people most at risk, or are they preventing them from visiting and using our lands? Yes, there are waiver procedures, but we ask you to look fundamentally at the rationale for charging for access and use in urban areas and other lands that could truly make a difference in improving individual and community health and attracting people of color and limited economic means who might otherwise never choose to visit our nation's federal public lands and parks.

We ask that you consider how we can better serve our members of our nation's armed forces, and give special attention to serving the needs of returning service members, especially those that have been wounded or who have become disabled. Your oversight of FLREA should include these important considerations.

In addition, careful thought should be given the examining all the reasons for charging fees in relation to other efforts in marketing and promotion of our national public lands to the public who is increasingly making the decision NOT to visit national parks, wildlife refuges, and other federal public lands. We can tell you from anecdotal and some survey evidence that the public does appear to support reasonable increases in fees if services and quality are also increased, but clearly, high fee charges are a barrier to many people, especially young people and families, when making the choice to visit a national park versus a state, regional, or county park.

Finally, I would like to close with a few comments about the need to include the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the provisions of FLREA. I have been serving on a volunteer recreation strategy advisory group to the Corps with a number of representatives from other national organizations looking at what needs to be done to assist the Corps in bringing better recreational opportunities to the American public in its 4000 recreation areas that generate 370 million public visits per year.

The Corps is not included in FLREA. The Corps cannot participate in the America the Beautiful Federal Interagency Pass program. Because of this, the Corps cannot sell or distribute the new Annual Pass (\$80), Senior Pass (\$10), Disabled Access Pass (free) and Volunteer Pass (based on hours volunteered).

The Corps cannot retain recreation fee receipts to pay for operations and maintenance of its parks. The fee receipts go to the Federal Treasury. The Corps collects about \$43 million a year in recreation fees. If the Corps was included in FLREA, about 80% of those fees would go back to the parks at which they were collected to help pay for

operations and maintenance.

The Corps should be part of the Federal agencies covered under FLREA so it can administer recreation passes and recreation fees consistent with the other land management agencies. Excluding the Corps from FLREA has resulted in public confusion, and angry visitors who cannot obtain the new passes.

Because of this exclusion, the Army Corps of Engineers would not be able to sell or accept a Veterans pass when presented by a veteran at an **Army** recreation area. This would be a terrible disservice to America's military veterans. This situation can be averted by inclusion of the Corps of Engineers under the broader authorizing legislation—the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. The Corps should be added to FLREA in order to implement the Military Pass, if the bill was enacted.