



**Testimony of Todd Davidson
On Behalf of
Western States Tourism Policy Council and Southeast Tourism Society
Before the
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
House Committee on Natural Resources
Regarding the *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Modernization Act*
October 28, 2015**

Good morning Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas, and members of the Subcommittee.

We appreciate this opportunity to discuss ideas for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and to allow the expertise and resources of states and local gateway communities to be fully leveraged to drive increased visitation and *enhanced* recreation opportunities on federal lands.

I am Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon and am testifying today on behalf of the Western States Tourism Policy Council (WSTPC) and the Southeast Tourism Society (STS). Together we strongly endorse modernization and long-term reauthorization of FLREA. We can attest to the importance of FLREA to public lands recreation and tourism in our states.

WSTPC is a consortium of thirteen Western state tourism offices, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Our members are appointed by governors and report to our state legislatures. WSTPC's creation was inspired by the 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism, which urged greater regional attention to the interrelationships between Federal lands, the environment and tourism. The mission of the WSTPC is to foster and encourage a positive environment for travel and tourism by serving as a forum to identify research, analyze, and advocate on behalf of the travel and tourism related issues of public policy and opinion in the Western United States.

STS is a not-for-profit membership association that works to elevate the talents and strategies of travel and tourism organizations and individual professionals within its twelve state region. STS's mission is to strengthen the economic vitality of the region by uniting all segments of the travel and tourism industry through education, advocacy, networking, and recognition.

Established in 1983, STS is an engaged network of more than 800 members across twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Together, our organizations represent 25 states that are home to some of America's most spectacular and iconic federal lands – well known to this Subcommittee. From Mount Hood National Forest and the Petrified Forest National Park to the Chickasaw National Wildlife Refuge and the Hot Springs National Park and many sites in between, federal lands, recreation, and conservation play a critical role in driving local economies and creating extraordinary travel experiences. As organizations that represent communities across half of the country, we support the reauthorization and enhancement of FLREA and offer these proposals to better engage states and local communities, enhance visitor and recreation experiences, and support local and regional economies through increased visitation and tourism revenues.

Although management of federal lands is funded primarily by appropriations, a significant and growing portion of this management depends upon entrance and recreation fees. Revenues collected through FLREA should enhance visitor experiences, provide funds to repair, maintain, and improve facilities; restore wildlife habitat for visitor recreation; offer educational materials and services; and provide law enforcement.

Actively Encourage Technology Utilization

Effective utilization of technology is a challenge for organizations of all sizes and scope. This is particularly true for federal land management agencies, which face the challenge and obligation of adopting systems that effectively achieve their mission and honor public service requirements while also addressing the complexities of implementing systems across multiple government agencies and a workforce with vast geographic, access, and skill ranges.

We recommend that 'technology' be explicitly authorized under FLREA for needed technology investments and programs. Active congressional encouragement is needed for the FLREA agencies to make the necessary investments in technology in order to maximize the accountability and efficiency of fee collection, the permitting process, and visitor services, as well as increasing the convenience of paying fees and accessing sites.

We propose that a fixed percentage of the national portion of entrance and recreation fees on sites that have fee revenue of more than \$500,000 annually be designated for technology utilization. Further, we recommend that the legislation detail specific milestones to be achieved on technology over the course of the reauthorization period. There can be several strategies that leverage technology. At this point in time, we see the following as early priorities for the Committee's consideration:

- Implementing electronic systems for paying entrance, recreation, and permit fees, as well as purchasing entrance passes. This is our top priority as this investment of technology will produce immediate dividends of accountability, efficiency, and convenience. Implementing these systems would also contribute to the reduction of traffic delays at entrance stations of heavily visited units. We also encourage you to consider giving

international visitors the same opportunity to purchase passes and entrance fees electronically.

- With respect to permitting, it's important that any reform recognize the role outfitters and guides – the small businesses in gateway communities -- have in facilitating visitor access to many public lands venues. We believe this FLREA modernization initiative is the right time to streamline permitting and move to a system that allows for online processing of single and multiple permits.
- Specifically allow the designated technology funds to be used for upgrades and expansion of the federal lands interagency program Recreation.gov, which provides reservation services, sharable data, and recreation trip-planning for federal lands and waters in the United States.
- Designated FLREA funds should also be devoted to developing technology infrastructure to drive private sector innovation and improve the visitor experience at the local/site level. We propose that one of the technology priorities be to develop and maintain an electronic resource that compiles visitation and outdoor recreation data across all federal lands and waters for information, guides, amenities, and reservations into a common visitor-services platform. Using Recreation.gov as a model for cross-agency collaboration, the visitor-services platform would encourage and enhance tourism and recreation on federal sites, improve the efficiency and effectiveness of federal agency operations, enrich the visitor experience for a diverse set of audiences, and create opportunities for private sector collaboration. States and local destination marketing organizations and business would be able to access the data to target their promotional efforts and, working collaboratively, the private sector would be able to develop applications and other tools to better utilize and enhance visitor and recreation programs at the local, regional or national level. One-size-fits-all-solutions won't work for the technology challenges faced by federal land agencies, but a single resource can drive the targeted solutions that work for the diverse array of federal lands and communities.

Create an Avenue for the Technology Sector to Provide Long-Term Counsel

Technology is not a magic bullet: once an infrastructure is developed the work is not done. On-going efforts are needed to ensure that federal land management agencies are considering new technologies and leveraging the best technology solutions. In order to accomplish this, we call for the establishment of a technology advisory board to provide insight and counsel on developing a world class technology infrastructure for the federal lands management agencies. The advisory board would be convened by the Secretary of the Interior with guidance and support from the Secretary of Agriculture and other affected departments.

We are continually impressed by the talents and dedication of federal lands employees, but for even the best federal lands manager large-scale technology is a challenge and, frankly, local situations may require different strategies. Drawing on the expertise of the nation's technology sector would ensure that federal lands agencies are utilizing innovative solutions to developing technology infrastructure and standards.

Stronger Engagement with Local Communities

We would like to see a provision included in FLREA reauthorization to specifically allow the fee revenues retained at the site to be used for cooperative promotional efforts with local communities. Such a provision would make clear that local cooperation is not only permitted, it is expected.

Modernizing FLREA is an opportunity to drive stronger engagement between the federal lands management agencies and local communities. Many federal land managers perceive marketing and promotion as prohibited activities and are reluctant and/or unwilling to discuss cooperative programs with destination marketing organizations. Not only is this a missed opportunity for sites to showcase their attractions and programs, but it also means that they are failing to leverage the expertise of the tourism community in targeting and attracting a new generation of visitors -- key demographics, such as Millennials, Hispanic and African-American families and driving visitation in non-peak periods.

We recognize that federal land managers may have limited understanding of the fundamentals of marketing and promotion. But that doesn't mean it shouldn't or can't be done. We see this as an opportunity to put the talents and expertise of the travel and tourism sector to work for local federal lands in order to help them better achieve their visitation, outreach and programmatic goals.

Additionally, the position of National Director of Tourism at the National Park Service has been vacant for more than a year now. Currently, the position is located in the Office of the Director. We would like to see the position filled and the responsibilities expanded to include providing technical assistance to park superintendents and local communities in developing public/private partnerships to preserve and maintain historic, cultural, and natural resources that create new businesses to better tell the story of a community and provide exceptional travel experiences.

Testimony before this Committee on July 23rd by the President & CEO of the Greater Hot Springs, Arkansas Chamber of Commerce made clear that local communities and businesses are eager to develop partnerships. That example of creatively using important sites and structures, such as the Hot Springs bathhouses, while relieving NPS of the responsibility for maintaining and preserving the structures should be encouraged and empowered. We believe park superintendents are also interested in developing such partnerships, but neither side has the resources or expertise to develop long-term leases that dictate the preservation requirements and the necessary permissions for the businesses or non-profits. These are small organizations. Technical assistance from the NPS headquarters on engaging with local communities and developing public/private partnerships would be a significant resource for park superintendents to better leverage the expertise and capabilities of local tourism offices.

At present, the National Park Service has a National Tourism Strategy and a National Tourism Director position. We believe that by strengthening the duties of the position, NPS would provide an excellent model for how federal land management agencies can engage with local communities and the tourism sector. Each of the authorized agencies under FLREA has a dedicated tourism coordinator who participates in federal policy forums, such as the Tourism

Policy Council, but these coordinators are underutilized as resources for frontline staff and local communities.

Empowering federal lands managers to actively engage with the travel and tourism sector would connect federal policies with frontline tourism communities and businesses. This would demonstrate that investments in federal lands are investments in local communities. By encouraging federal land management agencies to develop strategies for engaging with the travel and tourism sector and local communities, FLREA will be driving policies to ensure the economic impact of federal lands visitation and recreation are broadly shared by the states, communities, and small business.

Leveraging the America the Beautiful Pass to Connect More Visitors to Federal Lands

We believe the America the Beautiful Pass, the national parks and federal recreational lands pass, is a terrific yet underutilized resource for promoting visitation to national parks and other federal lands. We'd like to see every American connect with the national parks by holding an America the Beautiful Pass as a badge of honor. Investing in technology, particularly Internet applications, social networks, and other digital technology will make it easier to promote and purchase the pass.

Policy changes have allowed for bulk sales of the pass and many tour operators now include the pass as part of their travel packages. With the launch four years ago of the nation's first destination marketing effort to encourage international visitors to travel to the United States, Brand USA, we would be disappointed to see any federal policy that creates an unwelcoming sense for international visitors. Yes, international visitors do not pay taxes to support the federal lands but travelers are subjected to a whole host of taxes and fees that fund travel programs and visitor experiences, as well as government general expenditure funds. U.S. citizens and residents are able to use the pass for a full year, but an international visitor that is only in the country for 2-3 weeks has limited use and is likely a money generator.

In addition, international visitors spend more money during their travels than domestic travelers. From a state and local perspective, we would much prefer that happy visitors feel welcome and spend more money at federal sites and local communities during their visit rather than requiring they pay more to visit public lands.

At present, there is no vehicle for counting the number of international visitors to federal lands. While only a partial snapshot, the data collected from the America the Beautiful Pass, particularly if needed technology investments are made, would provide basic data on international visitation and the sites visited, which could be used to fine tune international marketing efforts.

Aligning Federal Land Management Agencies and FLREA

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is the largest provider of water-based outdoor recreation in the nation, with 403 recreation projects spread over 43 states. Corps recreation projects, host more than 370 million visits a year. These recreation projects are also a significant economic

driver for many communities and the nation—visitors spend \$18 billion a year to visit Corps lakes and support 270,000 jobs to the nation’s economy.

There are about 4500 recreation areas, managed by the Corps and a variety of partners and commercial operations. In addition, Corps lakes provide 33% of all freshwater fishing in the U.S, and a wide variety of recreation opportunities including camping, swimming beaches, picnic areas, 11,200 miles of trails, 3,600 boat launch ramps, and over 500 marinas. Recreation at Corps lakes contribute to the quality of life for park visitors and neighboring communities as well as being a key force in many state and local tourism and economic development programs.

The Corps partners with local communities to host numerous special events such as fishing tournaments, fishing rodeos, lake clean-ups, and National Public Land Days events, as well as providing educational and water safety programs, and is an active federal partner in such efforts as Recreation.gov. However, the Corps is not one of the agencies covered by FLREA. We encourage Congress to include the Corps in in FLREA to better align tourism programs and partnerships with local communities.

Ensuring Recreation Fees Are Utilized for Maintenance and Enhancement of Recreation Sites

Increasingly, ski resorts are expanding their demographic markets and seasons by creating summer recreation programs. These off-season recreation programs require a permit and a fee for participation, but the collected fees are undesignated and sent to the Treasury as general revenue. In addition, permit fees established under the National Ski Area Act are not designated for recreational uses and also are returned to Treasury as general revenue. All other recreation and permit fees generated by individuals and outfitter guides are assessed and collected and used to the benefit of the federal land and water resource. As federal lands struggle to meet the basic maintenance needs of recreation sites and programs, it is inconsistent and poor fiscal policy not to recapture these recreation fees for use on the sites where they are generated. It is an industry best practice that taxes and fees collected from travelers are devoted back into the sector to ensure support and compliance. We recommend that this best practice be adopted for all fees generated at ski areas – both during peak ski season and off-season recreational activities.

Conclusion

These proposals aim to strengthen FLREA from the vantage point of local user groups, including the often over-looked gateway communities. These proposals are meant to encourage and enhance visitation and outdoor recreation and to create opportunities for collaboration with states, local communities and the private sector. We stand ready to work with you to advance a FLREA reauthorization that works for all of our federal lands stakeholders.