

**Statement of
Mark Rey
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
United States Department of Agriculture**

**Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

on

June 19, 2002

**Concerning
S. 2607, Federal Lands Recreation Fee Authority Act, and
S. 2473, Recreational Fee Authority Act of 2002**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Mark Rey, Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment. I am here today to present the Department's views on two bills, S. 2607, the Federal Lands Recreation Fee Authority Act, and S. 2473, the Recreational Fee Authority Act of 2002. In addition, I would like to discuss with you the results of the Forest Service's implementation of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program that is authorized by section 315 of Public Law 104-134.

Assistant Secretary, Lynn Scarlett, who co-chairs the Interagency Recreation Fee Leadership Council with me, has provided testimony on interagency coordination and accomplishments that I need not repeat. I will only add my agreement with her testimony and my hope that the legislative framework you provide will further the interagency cooperation we strive for in delivering a seamless Federal lands recreation program.

The Department supports S. 2607. The Department also would support S. 2473 if Congress were willing to include in the bill authority for the Forest Service, along with Interior agencies that have recreation responsibilities, to charge and retain recreation use fees.

S. 2607

S. 2607 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture to collect recreation fees at units or areas of Federal lands, such as national parks, national recreation areas, and national monuments. In addition, the Secretaries are authorized to collect fees at other areas if they are managed primarily for recreation purposes and contains at least one major recreation attraction; have had substantial Federal

investments; and if fees can be efficiently collected at public access points. The bill authorizes the collection of recreation use fees for specialized recreation sites, facilities, equipment, or services such as campgrounds, boat launches, and reservation services and authorizes the collection of special recreation permit fees for groups and commercial activities.

S. 2607 contains language similar to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act that authorizes the sale of Golden Eagle, Golden Age, and Golden Access Passports. This bill also retains authority for the Secretary of the Interior to sell the National Parks Passport.

S. 2607 authorizes the Secretaries to retain and spend 80 percent of the fees collected at the unit or area at which they were collected for resource preservation, backlogged repair, maintenance, and other specified uses. The remaining 20 percent is available for expenditure at other high priority agency recreation sites.

The Department supports S. 2607 and would like to work with the Committee on language to clarify the application of recreation use fees and to correct certain conforming amendments.

S. 2473

S. 2473 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to charge and retain fees for admission and use of units and areas administered by the National Park Service for the purposes of repair, maintenance, interpretation, resource preservation, and other similar uses.

The Department would like to work with Mr. Thomas to amend the bill to include authority for the Forest Service, along with Interior agencies that have recreation responsibilities, to charge and retain fees. This change would permit the agencies to continue successful implementation of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program authorized by section 315 of Public 104-134.

Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

The Recreational Fee Demonstration Program has provided a tremendous opportunity for Forest Service managers to meet the expectations of recreation visitors to the national forests. The authority for the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program was enacted in 1996 to "demonstrate the feasibility of user-generated cost recovery for the operation and maintenance of recreation areas or sites" on Federal lands. Through fiscal year 2001, nearly \$106 million in new funding have been generated above Congressional appropriations to enhance the visitor experience at 87 national forest projects across the United States. Program funds are making a crucial difference in providing quality recreation services, reducing maintenance backlog, enhancing facilities, enhancing safety and security, and conserving natural resources.

With authorization of a long-term recreation fee retention program, the Forest Service, along with the Interior agencies with which we work, can build further on its successes.

Improvements in payment convenience, accountability, market analysis and research, partnerships, interagency coordination, and consistency in program delivery will be possible with long-term authorization.

Important elements of long-term recreation fee authority would include: providing enough flexibility in the program to meet the unique needs of visitors, yet a solid framework for consistency among agencies in program delivery; retaining all the fees without offset for direct reinvestment into recreation sites, facilities, and services to benefit visitors; allowing for cooperative efforts with other entities (federal, state, tribal, local, and private) in sharing pass programs, fees, and revenues; allowing for retention of recreation special use permit fees to provide additional enhancements; and providing enforcement capability for fair and equitable program implementation.

The Visit Idaho Playgrounds pass is just one example of cooperative efforts to benefit visitors. This annual pass is valid at over 100 recreation sites throughout Idaho operated by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, and Idaho Department of Parks. Passes are available for purchase via a website or by a toll-free telephone number for visitor convenience. Revenues are shared according to a formula developed for the business plan, and revenues are directed back to the recreation sites for improvements in facilities and services.

Additional examples of the benefits to visitors made possible by the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program include:

- About \$23 million to reduce backlog maintenance and improve health and safety through repair and/or replacement of inadequate toilets, picnic tables, building roofs, water and sewer lines, trails, and other facilities. Examples include maintenance of 940 miles of trails in Oregon and Washington; repair or replacement of four toilets, 300 shade ramadas, 25 picnic tables, and 50 fire ring/grills at Roosevelt Lake in Arizona; and repair of a sewer line at Sitting Bull Falls in New Mexico.
- Over \$11 million for new and improved interpretive and informational materials and services, such as signs, brochures, campfire talks, and visitor center staffing. Visitor centers at Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument in Washington operated for longer hours with additional interpretive talks than otherwise possible; Evans Notch Visitor Center in New Hampshire contacted 34,000 visitors and provided numerous children's programs; El Portal Visitor Center in Puerto Rico reached some 8,400 visitors through the "Rent-A-Ranger" and "Forest Adventure" programs; and over 250,000 visitors to Palatki Ruins in Sedona, Arizona enjoyed interpretive talks.
- About \$4 million for habitat enhancement and resource preservation such as improvements for wildlife viewing and fishing, erosion control devices, and historic building restoration. The Pack Creek bear viewing platform in Alaska allowed more than 1,400 visitors to safely view brown bear. Historic cabins throughout Arizona and New Mexico were rehabilitated for public rental.

- \$3 million for law enforcement to enhance the safety and security of all users, including 157,368 additional visitor contacts, 2030 public “emergency assists”, and extinguishing 4795 abandoned campfires in southern California. At Canyon Creek in Colorado, visitor contact increased 80 percent;
- Over \$8 million for facility enhancements such as new trails, new campsites, and accessibility for the disabled. Some examples include improved wheelchair accessibility at 6 restrooms, 3 boat ramps, 2 fishing piers, and a beach on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Wisconsin, and new restrooms and interpretive shelter at Keown Falls, Georgia;
- About \$28 million for annual operation including visitor services, litter removal, toilet pumping, water sampling, supplies, and services such as reserved permits, camping reservations, and heritage expeditions. One ton of refuse and abandoned materials were removed from wilderness areas in Idaho and Montana; Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota maintained 660 wilderness campsites and 333 miles of trails; the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania increased visitor contacts at boat launches and increased recreation site maintenance; and in numerous additional ways throughout the nation, National Forest visitors enjoyed enhanced services.

Initiation of fees has stirred some controversy and generated media interest. The Forest Service has made a number of changes to projects based on public comment, including consolidating fees, providing better information on expenditures, working with other agencies, conducting market studies prior to implementation, and continuing to listen, learn, and change.

In fact, in response to concerns we have heard, we have developed principles to guide our implementation of the demonstration program through the remaining years of its current authorization. These principles include the following:

- A seamless fee program across agencies that is designed for visitor convenience;
- Fees are part of a larger financial plan for recreation that includes appropriations, volunteers, partnerships, and interagency cooperation;
- Each national forest and grassland will continue to provide areas where a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities are available free of charge;
- Fee revenues are retained at the site where they are collected to provide desirable and visible benefits to the visitor;
- Program implementation will be based on consistent criteria rather than through a set number of sites;
- Communities of place and interest are consulted on decisions and informed on how the revenues are invested.

In addition we have considered the types of sites and services where no fees would be charged. We would not charge a fee for general access to National Forests or Grasslands. We would not charge a fee for undesignated parking along roadways, for overlooks, or for scenic pullouts. We would not charge a fee for dispersed recreation areas with low or

no expenditures in facilities or services. We would not charge a fee for general information services and centers.

I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, other members of the Committee, and our interagency partners to implement a permanent fee program. This concludes my statement. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have.