STATEMENT

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CONCERNING

EXPANDING ACCESS TO NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM LANDS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the Forest Service's ongoing efforts to expand access to recreational opportunities within the National Forest System for all Americans, and in particular those with disabilities.

I am Jim Bedwell, Forest Service Director of Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources. From 1996 through 2000, while serving as the Chief Landscape Architect for the agency, I also managed the accessibility program. I have with me the current Forest Service Accessibility Program Manager, Janet Zeller, as well as the agency's first Accessibility Program Manager, Joe Meade, who is currently the Forest Supervisor of the Chugach National Forest in Alaska. With the Chairman's permission, I may direct questions to either of these individuals, if needed.

Background

The Forest Service as steward of the nation's forests and grasslands values the contribution of all Americans, including those with disabilities. One of the first and early scientists and explorers to survey and chronicle the forests west of the 100th meridian was a single-armed Civil War veteran, John Wesley Powell. The journals of Major Powell, which Wallace Stegner, a Powell biographer, called "the finest narrative exploration in all American literature," make clear that Major Powell never considered himself to be limited by his disability. Major Powell was wounded in the Civil War battle of Shiloh and later became the second director of the United States Geological Survey (USGS), which at the time had the responsibility for assessing and characterizing the forest resources of the Western United States, leading to the establishment of the Bureau of Forestry.

Accessibility Programs

Today, there are an estimated 54 million U.S. residents with disabilities. Many of these folks maintain a life-long connection and affinity for the forests and rangelands that comprise the National Forest System. They enjoy the outdoor recreational opportunities these lands provide. To support that relationship with the land, accessibility must be integrated into planning and construction of trails and outdoor developed recreational facilities on National Forest System lands.

We ensure that Forest Service programs and facilities are accessible, in compliance with the Architectural Barriers Act; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; and 7 CFR 15b and 15e, USDA's implementing regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. However, the Forest Service's commitment to accessibility goes beyond compliance with applicable law.

The Forest Service has a long-term commitment to accessibility, as shown by the agency's strategic plan for recreation, which was implemented in 2003 and renewed through 2012. One of the goals of the strategic plan is improving the quality and availability of outdoor recreational experiences for all people, with and without disabilities. A key performance measure of that goal is the percentage of capacity at developed recreation sites that meets accessibility standards. Accessibility has also been incorporated into the Forest Service directive system.

With 193 million acres of National Forest System lands receiving more than 334 million recreation visits each year, the Forest Service remains the largest provider of outdoor recreational opportunities in the country. We are the nation's backyard where the American people recreate. The Forest Service strives to maximize accessibility without fundamentally altering outdoor recreational experiences and the natural environment. This approach is critical because people recreating on national forest and national grasslands and on lands managed by other federal agencies are looking for a range of opportunities, from highly developed areas with paving and hot showers to remote areas where there are few or no visitor amenities.

Outdoor recreation is about individual choice as to the type of opportunity, including the type of access, being sought by the recreationist. Land management agencies can help individuals locate areas that are easy to access, including those where motor vehicles can be used, to reach a wide range of recreational settings. Land management agencies also are able to direct visitors to more remote, non-motorized areas that are more difficult to access but offer greater solitude. There are locations that blend both of those experiences, easy access and a sense of remoteness, including locations where even a motor home can be driven. The Forest Service is deeply committed to preserving this range of options from which all visitors can choose the type of recreational experience they are seeking.

To provide accessibility and to maintain the wide range of recreational opportunities from which all people can choose, the Forest Service since 1993 has incorporated universal design into the agency's recreation program. Universal design involves integrating

accessibility into the design of recreational facilities to the extent appropriate to the natural setting, rather than constructing separate facilities for people with disabilities. All Forest Service recreational facilities that are newly constructed or altered must be appropriate to the setting and accessible. However, to implement this policy effectively, the Forest Service needed guidelines for its employees and cooperators.

Ten years ago, the Forest Service worked with the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (Access Board), along with other agencies and organizations, to develop the Access Board's Draft Guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas. I personally participated in that process with many others in this room, as a member of the Access Board's regulatory negotiation committee. Ultimately those draft guidelines were published in 2007 as the Access Board's proposed rule on accessibility at outdoor developed areas on federal lands.

However, by 2002 it was clear that the Access Board's rule-making process would be delayed. We have hundreds of millions of visitors, some of whom have disabilities, and thousands of facilities that could benefit from improvement. In response to those needs, in 2002 the Forest Service began development of our own accessibility guidelines for outdoor developed areas and trails in the National Forest System, based on the Access Board's proposed guidelines and in coordination with the Access Board. In May 2006, the Forest Service issued the Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines (FSORAG) and Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG). We continue to collaborate with the Access Board on providing for accessibility at outdoor developed areas on federal lands, including sharing information regarding implementation of the Forest Service's accessibility guidelines.

All new, altered or reconstructed facilities, including campgrounds, picnic areas, scenic overlooks, and the routes between them, must comply with the FSORAG. In addition to requiring that every building be accessible, the FSORAG requires all new picnic tables, fire rings, and camping units to be accessible. Toilet facilities must be accessible, regardless of whether they are a primitive facility on a trail or a facility serving visitors at a large campground, so that visitors choosing that type of recreational experience can use the facility provided, regardless of whether they have a disability.

To assist Forest Service employees and cooperators with implementation of the Forest Service's accessibility guidelines, the agency has developed and distributed the *Accessibility Guidebook on Outdoor Recreation and Trails* to Forest Service administrative units and cooperators. In addition, we have integrated accessibility requirements into training courses for employees and cooperators.

The FSORAG and FSTAG have enhanced accessibility at outdoor developed areas on National Forest System lands. Our visitors who use these outdoor recreational facilities have affirmed that. Results from the Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey show that 79 percent of National Forest System visitors state that they find Forest Service facilities to be accessible. Currently, 41 percent of Forest Service recreational buildings and 26.5 percent of Forest Service recreational sites are in full compliance with

the Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Guidelines and the FSORAG. As new facilities are constructed, altered, or reconstructed, those numbers will increase. In addition, all new or altered trails that meet the criteria for providing accessibility must comply with the FSTAG.

Throughout the country and in every national forest and national grassland there are many examples of accessible developed recreation areas—including campgrounds, picnic areas, trailheads, and trails—that demonstrate the Forest Service's commitment to universal design and ensuring access for all visitors. One outstanding example is the interpretive trail at the Ouachita National Historic Battlefield Visitor Center jointly managed by the Forest Service and National Park Service on the Black Kettle National Grasslands in Oklahoma. When construction is completed later this year, this interpretive trail will provide an opportunity for the Roger Mills County Historical Society and the local community to share their culture and history of the grasslands with visitors to battlefield. This trail will be fully accessible, so that all visitors will be able to enjoy the educational opportunity.

The Recreation Site Improvement Program, which addresses deferred maintenance for developed recreation sites, incorporates accessibility into the work performed under the program. Facilities at developed recreation sites are being modified or replaced to ensure accommodation for all users. Currently, 344 toilets, 82 drinking water systems, 1,584 picnic tables, 894 fire rings, and 441 other buildings are approved, funded, or scheduled to be modified for accessibility in accordance with the FSORAG.

The FSORAG and FSTAG and the Access Board's guidelines for outdoor developed areas are unique in that they are designed to maximize accessibility while maintaining the natural setting, thereby avoiding overdevelopment and otherwise undermining the experience of the natural environment all of our visitors expect from the national forests and national grasslands. Under this approach, a wide range of recreational opportunities is preserved for all people.

In the 15 years since the Forest Service implemented its policy of universal design, requiring every constructed or altered facility to be accessible, we have found the difference in cost to be negligible. Some of our visitors prefer the design and ease of use of accessible facilities and elements, even if they do not have a disability.

Over the last several years, the Santa Fe National Forest in northern New Mexico has worked hard to make its recreational areas more accessible. Like all national forests and national grasslands, the Santa Fe National Forest has a number of campgrounds and picnic grounds that were built decades ago and that are dearly loved by recreationists, but that do not comply with the FSORAG. In the last ten years, the Santa Fe National Forest, through the Capital Investment Program funded by Congress, has invested over $5 million in reconstructing and upgrading its developed recreation sites. This investment has resulted in accessible fishing, picnicking, and camping opportunities at Lower Jemez Recreation Complex and Las Conchas Fishing Access; accessible family and group picnicking at Battleship Rock Picnic Ground near the Valles Caldera National

Preserve; accessible family and group camping at the Paliza Campgrounds; and accessible camping at Black Canyon Campground, located only seven miles northeast of New Mexico's capital, Santa Fe.

People often ask me, "Well, universal design sounds good, but doesn't it cost a lot more?" The reality is, and the economic analyses we did for the Access Board regarding the costs of implementing the Board's proposed rule supports this conclusion, when accessibility is incorporated into the design of a facility from the beginning, the costs associated strictly with accessibility are a negligible percentage of the overall costs of the project. Providing for accessibility only gets prohibitively expensive when it is not considered and incorporated into the early design and construction phases and the project has to be retrofitted. All visitors to federal lands, regardless of their ability, can enjoy facilities that are accessible. As I tell our employees and cooperators, making new, altered, or reconstructed Forest Service facilities accessible is not just the law, it makes good sense programmatically.

The Forest Service's accessibility guidelines, which are based on the Access Board's draft guidelines, work well. They are cost-effective and protect the natural environment, thereby allowing all people, with and without disabilities, to recreate together in the setting they choose.

The Forest Service has demonstrated its commitment through its policies and actions at all levels of the agency to the continuous improvement of accessibility for all Americans. We are submitting the *Forest Service Accessibility Guidebook on Outdoor Recreation and Trails* for the record, as it graphically depicts the Forest Service's accessibility guidelines, as well as provides an overview of the Forest Service's accessibility program. We would also be glad to provide any member of the Subcommittee with a copy.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members may have.