

STATEMENT OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS, AND MINING CONCERNING S. 3366, A BILL TO AMEND THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT TO MAKE THE NATIONAL PARKS AND FEDERAL RECREATIONAL LANDS PASS AVAILABLE AT NO COST TO MEMBERS OF GOLD STAR FAMILIES.

September 16, 2020

Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Wyden, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 3366, a bill to amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act to make the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available at no cost to members of Gold Star Families.

The Trump Administration supports our military, veterans, and Gold Star Families. The Department believes free access to national parks and other Federal lands should be extended to all veterans and Gold Star Families. We share the desire of the sponsors of this legislation to express our gratitude to veterans and the family members of the brave men and women in the Armed Services who have given their lives in the defense of our Nation. We are deeply indebted to those who have suffered the loss of parents, children, and siblings to that cause. Extending free access to our most treasured natural resources is a meaningful way to honor these truly exemplary patriots, and is consistent with the Trump Administration's commitment to support our veterans and Gold Star Families as they supported our country selflessly.

S. 3366 would amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (Public Law 108-447) (FLREA) to require the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to make the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass available to Gold Star Families free of charge. These passes provide for one year of free entry to fee-charging units of the National Park System and other Federal lands to the pass holder and those accompanying the pass holder.

Gold Star Family members for the purposes of S. 3366 are individuals who were awarded a Gold Star Lapel Button after losing a family member in a war, an international terrorist attack, or a military operation outside of the United States while serving with the U.S. armed forces. The bill uses the same criteria to determine eligibility for a Gold Star Parks Pass as the Department of Defense uses to determine eligibility for a Gold Star Lapel Button. Eligible individuals may include parents, children, and siblings, and other immediate family members of deceased Service members, such as stepchildren. Our Nation has used this term since World War I, when homes of fallen Service members displayed Gold Star flags in their windows to indicate their families' loss.

FLREA, enacted in 2004, authorizes the National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to collect and retain revenue and requires that fee revenue be used to enhance the visitor experience. At least 80 percent of the money stays in the park or recreation site where it is collected, and the other 20 percent benefits parks or sites that do not collect fees.

As a part of FLREA, Congress established the multi-agency America the Beautiful - the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass Program (Interagency Pass Program) to cover entrance fees for NPS and FWS and standard amenity recreation fees for the BLM, USFS, and BOR. The Interagency Pass Program began in 2007 and includes an annual pass for \$80, a \$10 lifetime pass (later changed to \$80) for those age 62 years or older (Lifetime Senior Pass), and a free lifetime pass for persons with permanent disabilities (Access Pass). Public Law 113-121, enacted in 2014, authorizes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to also participate in the Interagency Pass Program. In 2019, these six agencies sold an estimated three million passes. Revenue from the sale of the passes—which totaled nearly \$95 million in 2019—is a significant source of supplemental funding that enhances our efforts to address the maintenance backlog at our national parks, better manage other federal lands, and respond quickly to changes in visitation levels and service requirements.

The Department supports the goal of ensuring that individuals eligible for a Gold Star Families pass have free access for life, making the program more akin to the Lifetime Senior Pass or Access Pass than to the situational passes. This goal is consistent with the Trump Administration’s commitment to support Gold Star Families as they supported our country by selflessly sharing their loved ones for the noble cause of freedom. We look forward to working with the Committee and our partner agencies to resolve questions we have regarding implementation, such as simple ways to verify Gold Star Family members’ eligibility at Federal recreation sites.

Chairman Lee, this concludes our statement.