

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES

SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*



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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act September 17, 2015

“Well thank you Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this hearing this morning to consider the reauthorization of the federal government’s authority to collect recreational fees. And I welcome the witnesses. For those of us representing states with large amounts of federal land, outdoor recreation is an important part of our local economy.

“Sen. Wyden and I, just prior to the gaveling down, were just talking about those various activities within our two states and how much it means to us. I didn’t know that the senator had traveled to the seven wonders of Oregon. So, I think maybe next year as we celebrate our centennial, we’ll have to do something similar in Washington.

“Recreation fees have helped the land management agencies better provide and protect federal lands and provide important improved visitor services.

“In general, I support the extension of the authority for federal recreation fees so long as fees are kept at reasonable levels and do not discourage the public from accessing public lands. We must also ensure that fee revenues continue to be used to enhance visitor experiences on federal lands.

“For example, last year recreation fee revenues enabled the Forest Service, in partnership with the Washington Trails Association, to maintain and improve 92 miles of popular hiking trails across our state, including portions of the Quinault National Recreation trail system, the Duckabush trail and the Upper Big Quilcene trail. And so these recreation fees collected in the Olympic National Forest enabled the Washington Trail Association to donate 11,000 hours of servicing these trails.

“Fee revenues have enabled Mount Rainier National Park to:

- build a new ranger and visitor station at Carbon River;
- fund numerous trail, campground, and picnic area repairs and improvements; and
- help restore some of the Park’s subalpine meadows.

“Where there is a direct connection between the fee and the benefit to the public, recreation fees can improve both the management of the federal land and the visitor experience.



“It’s also worth noting that next year will mark the 100th anniversary of our National Park system. The Park Service collects over \$180 million in fee revenues each year. That is by far the largest amount of any of the federal agencies.

“Several of us have been working to develop a National Park Centennial bill. Certainly I want to work with the chairman on that. This bill would provide the Park Service, in its second century, with additional tools to enable it to better manage our National Parks system. I think we should consider extension of fee authority as an important way to improve visitor services and address the deferred maintenance backlog.

“While these recreation fees can help, I also want to put a reminder in that we need to make sure that we extend the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

“Money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund helps provide important outdoor recreation opportunities on federal and state lands. So I hope we will take advantage of the agreement, that this committee reached, so that we could push that forward.

“I believe it’s important for federal agencies to look for innovative ways to improve access to public lands for recreation, and I’ll give an example. For the past few years the YMCA of Greater Seattle has been trying to get the Forest Service to issue a permit to allow the YMCA to bring young people on to the national forests for the very first time. Because the Forest Service treats the YMCA as a commercial entity, their required permit has been held up.

“We have discussed this with Under Secretary Bonnie as well as the Forest Service, and I am happy that the Forest Service, as a first step is trying to fix this problem, and has provided the YMCA with temporary user day authorization.

“But for me the more fundamental issue as well, and we need to make sure that we are encouraging more people in to our national parks and not obstructing them to get there.

“Finally, I would like to highlight the issue of how we treat different users of public lands. The entrance fee at Mount Rainier National Park in my home state increased this year from \$15 to \$20 and will increase again next year to \$25. This represents a 67 percent increase in just two years.

“I recognize that the Park Service had not instituted fee increases for several years and that these are comparable with other outdoor recreation fees. However, the public seeking to visit national parks or other lands should not be the only ones paying higher fees.



“While park visitors are being assessed higher fees on public lands, fees charged for extractions on public lands remain historically low. So if we are going to ask the public to step up and fund increased recreation fees, then we ought to be asking those who are doing coal, hard rock mining and other extractions on federal lands to also pay an increase.

“So what I look forward to at this hearing and from the panel and the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail so that we can move forward on continuing to have great resources that the public can access. Thank you, Madam Chair.”

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