



NEWS

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RECREATION LEADERS OFFER TESTIMONY ON IMPROVING VISITOR EXPERIENCES IN NATIONAL PARKS



Photo Credit: House Oversight & Government Reform Committee

Washington, D.C. (April 5, 2017) – Recreation leaders from state and federal government agencies, as well as private-sector partners – including a member of the Outdoor Recreation Industry Roundtable (ORIR) – helped Members of Congress better understand how to improve visitor experiences on America’s public lands and waters during a Congressional hearing on April 5. The U.S. House of Representatives Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Interior, Energy and Environment held a hearing, “Improving Visitor Experiences in National Parks,” that examined the operation of visitor services programs around the country and discussed whether those programs’ practices and reforms, which are driving increases in visitation, should be adopted by the National Park Service (NPS) and other federal agencies. Key witnesses included Rick Cables, Vice President of Natural Resources and Conservation for Vail Resorts; Glenn Casamassa, Associate Deputy Chief of the U.S. Forest Service; ORIR member Chris Edmonston, Vice President of Government Affairs for BoatU.S.; and Linda Lanterman, Director of Kansas State Parks.

Subcommittee Chairman Blake Farenthold (R-TX) opened the session, quoting Stephen Mather, the first Director of the National Park Service, who said, “Scenery is a hollow enjoyment to the tourist who sets out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful night's sleep on an impossible bed.” To that end, the Chairman noted, private companies – concessioners – have been providing services to visitors since the creation of the first national parks in the nineteenth century. However, he also noted,

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the NPS has “failed to meet the changing demands of its visitors.” “This is where the role of concessioners is critical,” he said. “By providing up-to-date technology, contemporary food and beverage services, comfortable and modern places to stay, and unique visitor experiences, our parks become more attractive. Concessioners are in a position to help provide these services while providing needed funding to the Park Service.”

Mr. Edmonston highlighted the importance of boaters’ access to America’s public lands and waters, saying, “Reflecting on the visitor experience in National Parks provides an opportunity to consider how important access to the water is to boaters...Providing appropriate access is crucial to the long term political and financial support for national parks and other public lands.”

He described how public-private partnerships can help federal agencies overcome budgetary challenges, citing the creation of a nationwide towing dispatch service by BoatU.S. when budgetary concerns caused the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to end its long-time policy of aiding recreational boaters. “The program is effective and works well, is popular and allows the USCG to focus on emergency missions.” He also called for “the appropriate use of technology to improve visitor experiences on all public lands and waters.”

Mr. Cables stressed the importance of investment in recreation resources saying, “Our strategy is to continuously reinvest in all of our resorts to maintain a premier guest experience and our leadership position, with both capital investments on our mountains and in our resort communities. I submit that adopting policies that enable this approach is also the way forward for natural resources agencies like the U.S. Forest Service.”

He described the significant expansion of four-season visitor services made possible by the 2011 passage of the Ski Area Recreation Opportunity Enhancement Act. However, he explained, the additional workload and the agency’s reduced budgets have resulted in what he called “an acute bottleneck and backlog of projects waiting for review and processing.” In response, he offered a forward-looking and innovative solution, saying, “Congress could enact legislation to direct that the fees we pay for use of the national forests lands be kept within the local area instead of being directed to the National Treasury in Washington D.C.”

Ms. Lanterman provided examples of how Kansas State Parks – which receives no state general funds – meets the challenges of operating a primarily fee-based state park system. She said, “[W]e aggressively market our state parks within Kansas as well as nationally and internationally, we hold staff positions open for a certain time to reduce staffing costs, we have been successful with matching permit fees with demand. Additionally we have added special events to attract visitors and encourage their ongoing loyalty.” She also noted the importance of addressing changing needs and expectations of customers.

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Full written testimony from Mr. Edmonston, Mr. Cables and Ms. Lanterman can be found at www.funoutdoors.com/OGRTestimony. Video of the hearing can be found [here](#).

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About the Outdoor Recreation Industry Roundtable:

OUTDOOR RECREATION INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE – is a coalition of America’s leading outdoor recreation trade associations working to promote the policy and legislative reforms needed to grow the outdoor recreation economy. Roundtable members represent the thousands of U.S. businesses that produce vehicles, equipment, gear, apparel and services for the millions of Americans who enjoy our nation’s parks, waterways, byways, trails and outdoor spaces. Combined, the various business sectors within the outdoor recreation industry generate \$646 billion-per-year in economic activity and provide an estimated 6.1 million direct jobs. Coalition members produce the eight largest recreation tradeshow in the U.S. and their members annually contribute \$40 billion in federal excise tax, sales tax and duties.