

Statement for the Record
Department of the Interior
Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 1554, Hunt Unrestricted on National Treasures Act
July 30, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 1554, the Hunt Unrestricted on National Treasures (HUNT) Act. We appreciate the committee's attention to the important issue of hunting, fishing, and recreational access to public lands, and we share the sponsor's commitment to assuring access to public lands for recreational uses as authorized in applicable land use plans. The Department strongly supports the goal of increasing recreational access to public lands. However, the Department does not support the extensive reporting required by S. 1554 and would like to work with the sponsor on the reporting provisions of the bill so the bureaus can feasibly meet its requirements as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Background

The Department's bureaus manage 19% of the Nation's land area, much of it for recreation. Providing access to quality recreation on public lands is one of the Department of the Interior's primary missions as outlined in the current Strategic Plan which commits to improving outdoor recreation access and increasing opportunities for public enjoyment of Federal lands and waters. In addition to drawing young people outdoors to play, serve, learn, and work, outdoor recreation is a significant contributor to the national economy and the economies of communities that surround the lands we manage. It is important that we make recreational opportunities available in communities across the nation, to promote health and fitness, engage our youth, and inspire the next generations to conserve and protect America's precious resources. In 2012, the Outdoor Industry Association reported that recreation activities generate \$646 billion dollars in spending each year and support 6.1 million jobs. The approximately 417 million visits to DOI-managed lands in 2012 contributed an estimated \$45 billion in economic output to the surrounding economies through trip-related spending.

The FY 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act (PL 113-76) directed the Department and the U.S. Forest Service to report to Congress on actions they are taking to preserve and improve access to public lands for hunting, fishing, shooting and other recreational activities, including proposed improvements for public involvement in agency decision-making and coordination with State and local governments. The Department is finalizing that report and looks forward to sharing it with the Congress in the near future, as well as using it as a basis for further discussions with the bill's sponsor and the Committee.

Bureau of Land Management

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages roughly 245 million acres nationwide according to its multiple use and sustained yield mission. These public lands receive an estimated 60 million visits annually from hunters, anglers, hikers, bikers, OHV riders, climbers, boaters, and other recreationists. The BLM actively seeks to improve access to public lands and

has conducted several comprehensive analyses that reported on acres of land with inadequate access. More than 90% of BLM-managed lands are accessible to the public for recreational purposes. The BLM continually seeks opportunities to acquire access to those public lands which are inaccessible because of private or state land ownership patterns that block reasonable access.

The BLM uses information from these reports as well as input from the public during the land use planning process to drive the expansion of hunting, fishing, and recreational access opportunities through the acquisition of easements, rights-of-ways, and other means. For example, recently the BLM acquired the 920-acre Cross Mountain Ranch parcel in northwest Colorado using the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This acquisition opened access to 88,000 acres of public land for outstanding fishing, hunting, wildlife watching, and whitewater rafting opportunities. The BLM's 2015 funding request for LWCF is \$25 million for 14 projects in eight states, all of which would provide access to public lands that user groups have identified as being high priority. BLM field offices are also continually updating local maps and online resources such as web-based maps with improved access information that incorporate the unique user needs of each local area. In an effort to utilize technologies that will allow the public to produce and view web maps, the BLM is also developing an interactive web-based interface for public to access BLM maps, data, and information.

National Park Service

The National Park Service (NPS) manages 84 million acres of land in 401 national parks across the U.S. Since 1916, the American people have entrusted the NPS with the care of their national parks. With the help of volunteers and park partners, the NPS is proud to safeguard these special places and to share their stories with visitors across the nation. Each of these special places reflects a fundamental truth about the American experience, whether it is the natural beauty of our lands or the historic importance of the people and events that have shaped this nation. Our nation's 401 national parks welcomed more than 273.6 million visitors in 2013, contributed \$26.5 billion to the nation's economy, and supported 240,000 jobs nationwide.

The National Park System was created to conserve unimpaired many of the world's most magnificent landscapes. They are a remarkable collection of places in America for recreation and learning. As required by the 1916 Organic Act, these special places must be managed in a special way—a way that allows them to be enjoyed not just by those who are here today, but also by generations that follow.

The NPS manages programs that work with and beyond parks to help extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout the country. The NPS supports outdoor recreation that connects all Americans to their parks, trails, rivers, and other special places. The NPS provides grants to communities for the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational resources, and to help provide financial and technical assistance to communities across the country to eliminate barriers to accessing parks and recreational facilities.

The NPS also manages the 54,000-mile National Trail System, which provides recreational opportunities across the nation. These trails provide contact with the natural world, which improves the visitor's physical and psychological health and reduce stress.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Hunting and fishing are two priority public uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Over 500 national wildlife refuges and wetland management districts are open for fishing, wildlife watching, hunting, photography and other forms of recreation. Currently, 335 national wildlife refuges are open for hunting and 271 are open for fishing.

As a way to improve access for all Americans, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) manages over 3,500 small outdoor recreation facilities on national wildlife refuges that are accessible for hunters, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. These include boat ramps, hunting blinds, trails, fishing piers, boardwalks, visitor contact stations, interpretive kiosks, and observation platforms. These small facilities are supported by a network of well managed roads and trails that enhance access for the public. In Fiscal Year 2013, nearly 50 million National Wildlife Refuge System visitors took advantage of 2,700 special events and hundreds of quality hunting and fishing opportunities. Based upon public surveys, on average, 90 percent of visitors to national wildlife refuges gave high marks on their overall experiences, the responsiveness of staff, and access to our facilities and programs.

Refuges rely upon comprehensive conservation plans to identify areas to be opened to the public and are required to undertake appropriate use and compatibility reviews before new recreation programs can be offered. Refuge Managers often need to balance interests in opening new public use areas against other management considerations, such as emergency closures to protect critical resources that may change frequently. While supporting greater appropriate and compatible recreation on refuges, managers are mindful not to overbuild access points that could contribute to larger deferred maintenance backlogs or create potential conflicts with our habitat management goals.

S. 1554

S. 1554 would require the BLM, NPS, FWS, and the U.S. Forest Service, to produce a report, within 180 days and annually thereafter, identifying all parcels greater than 640 acres for which hunting, fishing, or recreational uses are allowed by law but public access is inadequate or unavailable. S. 1554 further requires the agencies to analyze whether that list of parcels has significant potential to be used for hunting, fishing, or recreation – and if so, to develop a plan that outlines the most reasonable course of actions needed to obtain or acquire access. The bill also requires that within one year, the agencies make available on a website a list of roads and trails that are the primary access and egress for all parcels greater than 640 acres.

The Department of the Interior supports the goal of collecting and making information about recreational access available to the public. However, we are concerned about the volume of data collection and analysis the bill would require, and would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee on an approach to prioritize the areas to be analyzed. Such reporting would help the Department prioritize recreation access projects. Further, we recommend that the sponsor exclude from the hunting access reporting requirement areas where hunting is not authorized by

law, such as in certain units of the National Park System. We look forward to working with the sponsor and the Committee to outline specific reporting requirements that could be successfully achieved given available staff and resources to meet the public's need for information.

S. 1554 also amends LWCF to require not less than 1.5 percent of the funds go to public access. The Department supports the goals of providing acquisition of easements, rights-of-way, and fee title acquisitions for the purpose of enhancing access to public lands, but we would like to note that a permanent set-aside may be premature, and access issues can be addressed administratively through the bureaus' annual LWCF prioritization process.

Conclusion

The Department strongly supports the goal of increasing access to public lands for hunting, fishing and other recreational purposes and we support making information about opportunities for public access available to the public. The Department would like to work with the sponsor and the committee to ensure that the bill's reporting requirements can be met given existing data and staffing limitations.