

**TESTIMONY
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE**

**BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS AND MINING**

**JULY 30, 2014
CONCERNING
S.1554 – Hunt Unrestricted on National Treasures Act**

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding S. 1554, the, “Hunt Unrestricted on National Treasures Act”. I am Gregory C. Smith, Acting Associate Deputy Chief, National Forest System, USDA Forest Service.

S. 1554 directs the heads of four Federal land management agencies (National Park Service, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management) to each prepare and make available to the public a report identifying parcels of 640 acres or more in size with no, or restricted, public access. The Act would further require the agency heads to characterize which of those parcels have significant potential for hunting, fishing or other recreational purposes. For those parcels with significant hunting, fishing or recreational opportunities the agency would be required to develop a plan on how minimally disruptive access could be obtained through easement and fee title acquisitions. The Act would require these reports and plans to be available within 180 days after enactment and annually thereafter.

The Act further requires that within one year the heads of the Federal land management agencies prepare a listing of the roads and trails that provide public access to the boundaries of parcels 640 acres or more in size on which the public is allowed to hunt and fish or use the land for other recreational purposes and the allowable modes of access. The listing would be thereafter revised as the head of the Federal public land management agency determines appropriate.

USDA strongly supports the goals of continuing to improve public access to all public lands for recreational uses, including hunting and fishing. We further recognize the economic and community benefits associated with hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation. However, the Department does not support the extensive and unnecessary reporting required by S. 1554. I defer to the witnesses from the Department of the Interior agencies to provide their perspectives on S. 1554.

The Forest Service enthusiastically supports hunting and fishing and many additional recreational opportunities that are available to the public across the vast majority of 193 million acres that comprise the National Forest System (NFS). Within our budget allocation, we invest in improving facilities that enhance these opportunities including trails, roads and campgrounds.

Mr. Chairman, the Forest Service does not have the data requested by the bill. It would be costly and time consuming to collect and verify the information and that task could not be completed within the timeframes required by the bill. The exercise would also draw considerable staff time and limited resources away from projects critical to the restoration of the health and vitality of NFS lands, including many projects that enhance hunting, fishing and recreational access. The accuracy of the report would be short-lived because of the constant changing of ownerships and subdivision of properties on lands outside Federal ownership. More importantly, this data set would not provide a product that will help to resolve the specific issue of restricted or limited access as problem access points are generally known at the field level.

All national forests are generally open to the public for recreational uses, including hunting and fishing. In some instances, such as high fire danger, temporary closures may be implemented to address immediate resource or human health and safety concerns. Occasionally, longer term closures on Federal land are necessary such as damage due to flooding or wildfire.

NFS land access issues are complex and multi-faceted and most cannot be resolved through simple easement or fee title acquisition. The issue is compounded by some private land owners adjacent to NFS lands not wanting to give the public access to their private lands. It is common in eastern states for access to isolated NFS land parcels to be granted to the Forest Service for administrative purposes but not for the general public. This is not always the case across the west.

The Forest Service's travel management policy requires each national forest and grassland to identify and designate roads, trails and areas that are open to motor vehicle use and complete motor vehicle use maps (MVUMs). As of the end of FY 2013, approximately 82 percent of NFS administrative units had completed route and area designations for motor vehicle use. The agency will continue to involve the public and local governments in local decisions and work collaboratively to ensure all public input is considered in the travel management planning process.

Finally, the Act would amend the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965 (LWCF) to require not less than 1.5 percent of such monies are used to secure public access from willing sellers. USDA supports the goals of providing acquisition of easements, rights-of-way, and fee title acquisitions for the purpose of enhancing access to public lands. However, we feel the permanent set-aside may be premature and access issues can be addressed administratively through the annual LWCF prioritization process. The President's 2015 Budget also proposes \$900 million in combined discretionary (\$350 million) and mandatory (\$550 million) funds for FY 2015, and permanent authorization of \$900 million in annual mandatory funding beginning in 2016.

Forest Service LWCF projects either directly provide recreational access or create new NFS land which is often open for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits. The President's Fiscal Year 2015 Budget request for the agency proposed using \$4 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (\$2 million in discretionary funds and \$2 million in mandatory funding) to

acquire strategically-located parcels that secure or improve access, both motorized and non-motorized, to NFS lands where access is currently unavailable or inadequate. Those funds will also be used to acquire parcels which provide direct use of important recreation resources, such as hunting and fishing opportunities, climbing routes and motorized uses. The agency's goal with recreational access is to invest LWCF funds to better meet recreation and other management needs. While we do not support the extensive data collection and reporting requirements of S. 1554, we look forward to working with the committee to strengthen our ability to continue to provide the public with ample opportunities and access to NFS lands for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation and to fully support reauthorization and full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions from members of the Committee.