

OUTDOOR RECREATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

October 10, 2019

The Honorable David L. Bernhardt
Secretary of the Interior
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

On behalf of the “Made in America” Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee (Committee) we are pleased to transmit to you recommendations for actions to expand and improve recreational opportunities and access to public lands and waters administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior (Department), and to update you on some leadership changes within the Committee. We appreciate your continued support for expanded recreational activities, such as your recent issuance of Secretary’s Order 3376 “Increasing Recreational Opportunities through the use of Electric Bikes.”

On Tuesday September 24, 2019, the Committee met in Washington, D.C. to discuss potential recommendations, and received very informative presentations on future enhancements to the recreation.gov website, and different public-private partnership models used for the operation of campgrounds in national parks. We were joined in person by Assistant Secretary Rob Wallace and National Park Service Deputy Director Daniel Smith, and over the phone by Senior Advisor Rick May, all of whom provided valuable insight and guidance on outdoor recreation priorities.

We were also briefed on the recent release of an updated Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account (ORSA) by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Your department was key to the creation of this account, first released in September 2018. The updated information confirmed recreation’s status as 2.2% of the nation’s total GDP and its growth rate markedly higher than the overall economy. The new data also reports on the outdoor recreation economy in each state and updates the total number of jobs associated with outdoor recreation to 5.2 million. The report underscores that most of these jobs are in the private sector, although we all recognize that our nation’s public lands and waters are important catalysts for this key industry.

The economic data from the ORSA briefing underscored the meeting’s NPS panel discussion on “Managing the Second Century of Campgrounds”. From the panel we heard about the challenges and current efforts to improve campground inventory and data management systems; campground modernization and rehabilitation strategies; and the impact of deferred maintenance on providing quality experiences for visitors. We learned about successful concession-managed front-country campgrounds from Grand Teton National Park staff, and updates on concession-supported NPS managed campgrounds from Blue Ridge Parkway staff. We were particularly pleased to have Acadia National Park staff and partners make the trip down from Maine to personally share the story of a public-private partnership that resulted in a new, state of the art Schoodic Woods Campground. We know that modernizing the infrastructure on our public lands

is one of your top priorities, and hearing from field staff about their successes and challenges brought the topic into sharp focus.

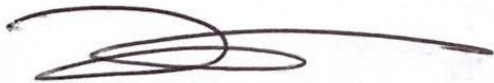
The Committee discussed and approved three distinct sets of recommendations, attached, for your consideration:

- *Hospitality Data Sharing - Improvements to the Recreation.gov website to enhance data sharing with third parties.*
- *Ideas to better leverage partner strength – specifically youth, veterans, and gateway communities – to improve visitor access, promote enjoyment of public lands, provide vocational training, and address housing shortfalls for park employees.*
- *Suggestions to modernize and expand campgrounds for this and future generations of outdoor recreationists.*

At the conclusion of the meeting, Amanda Covington announced she was recently promoted to Executive Vice President at her firm, and would not have the time needed to continue serving as Committee chair. Ms. Covington nominated me to take her place and I was honored by the unanimous support of my fellow members to serve as the new chair of the Committee with Derrick Crandall serving as my vice chair.

Our Committee looks forward to working with you and the Department on your goals and priorities, and developing additional recommendations for your consideration to better utilize public-private partnerships to improve public access and enjoyment of our public lands. Lastly, if you have any follow-up questions regarding implementation of our recommendations please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,



Bill Yeargin, Chair
Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee



Derrick Crandall, Vice Chair
Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee

Attachments (3)

Cc: Joshua Winchell
Designated Federal Officer
Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee

Hospitality Data Sharing

Background

These recommendations focus on hospitality data sharing, and directly address discovery and the reservation experience for activities, camping, permitting, and lodging as part of the overall trip planning journey. These recommendations will help overcome boundary issues associated with Federal, State, local public lands and private enterprises as well as barriers for data sharing among recreation agencies, partners, and providers.

Recommendations

Empower third-party private companies to create travel planning and recreation solutions. Specifically, the Federal government should prioritize the completion of the capability to make Recreation.gov reservation transactions on third-party websites. The necessary technology, known as APIs (application programming interface), are part of the existing Recreation.gov contract.

Private companies may then use this core of reservable assets to innovate a reservation ecosystem encompassing all available public and private reservable points of interest. Thus driving both the recreation and gateway community economies by increasing accessibility and visitation. Two outstanding issues require further clarification before the recommendations can be fully implemented:

- Will the Recreation.gov vendor or a third party be responsible for refunds, cancellation etc.?
- Which payment processor will be used?

Both issues have been resolved in the travel marketplace industry, and practical solutions are readily available. The Committee stands ready to assist the Department in resolving these issues moving forward.

The Committee offers additional guidance to support implementation of its recommendations:

Technical Requirements:

- Publish high availability APIs to facilitate reservations on third-party websites. Any requirement to redirect to Recreation.gov will break the broader discovery and reservation experience.
- Provide 24/7 developer support for APIs.
- Develop commiserate security protocols.

Business Model:

- The Recreation.gov vendor's cost to provide API access and support is charged to third parties. This should be done on a cost basis and monitored by the government. The recommendation is to employ a per transaction fee.
- The recommendation is that third parties will not participate in fees associated with the reservation of Recreation.gov facilities.
- The expectation is that the third parties will leverage these APIs to create value to the public and thus themselves through bringing a broader experience together (Activities, guides, events, hotels, transportation, etc.)

Leveraging the Strength of Youth, Veteran, and Gateway Community Partners

Background

These recommendations address the Department of the Interior's use of partnerships and collaboration to benefit our vast and cherished network of public lands throughout the United States. An emphasis has been placed on improved and responsible visitor access and enjoyment, for the purpose of sustaining public lands for future generations. Our recommendations are organized as follows:

1. *Department should seek partnership opportunities to build broader knowledge, use of, and constituency for public lands.*
2. *Department should create a vocational training initiative for youth and veterans to work on public lands.*
3. *Department should work closely with local gateway communities to address housing issues critical to utilization and enjoyment of Interior lands and waters.*

While many potential recommendations can be applied system-wide throughout the Department, we have chosen to focus on recommendations that are actionable at the local and regional levels.

Recommendations

1. *Department should seek partnership opportunities to build broader knowledge, use of and constituency for public lands.*

To ensure the long-term viability of its mission, the Department and other Federal and State agencies will need to perpetuate an informed and enthusiastic constituency of parks and public lands and waters supporters. Should the American public, through lack of enjoyment or shifts in demographics, grow to regard national parks and other public lands and waters as irrelevant or unimportant, Federal agencies risk losing legislative support to maintain public lands for the benefit of all Americans.

We recommend the Department engage in partnerships with conservation and outdoor recreation industries to promote accessible visitation and responsible enjoyment of our public lands, which will help to ensure future generations of parks' enthusiasts. The Department should also make a concerted effort to develop the next generation of its employees, as well as continuously educate its current workforce about the importance of the Department to the outdoor industry.

The Department should also examine targeted marketing efforts to promote public land visitation. Consolidating communications could have the positive effect of amplifying the reach of the Department's messaging. Funding for this endeavor could be offset through industry partnerships.

These recommendations work in synergy with suggestions we previously submitted to the Department of the Interior on December 12, 2018. Those earlier suggestions were provided to help meet the goal of better understanding recreational visitors and partners, leveraging technology to improve the visitor experience, using geographic information

systems to provide critical data for decision making, and better coordinating funding in support of regional initiatives.

We offer the following specific strategies for improving partnership and collaboration:

- a) The Department should engage with national trade organizations that can promote public lands to the general public. The benefit could be increased engagements with students, recreational enthusiasts, the entertainment industry, first responders, cartographers, engineers, etc.
 - b) The Department should host “familiarization tours” for media outlets by inviting and hosting appropriate travel, outdoor, and recreation media representatives to a media availability event once a year. The Department could provide the media with photography, press releases, and access to key park staff members to help promote public lands through positive news stories.
 - c) There is likely great interest, particularly from young conservationists, to learn about Department career opportunities. The Department should therefore offer specialized job shadowing experiences and internship programs, both on public lands and in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the Department should work with the outdoor recreation industry to ensure its Senior Executive Service-level personnel are educated about outdoor recreation trends and opportunities.
 - d) The Department should also offer job shadowing experiences for officials and media representatives from gateway communities, to help build awareness and enthusiasm for parks. Invited guests could experience a “day in the life of” a head ranger, lookout tower ranger, etc. The experiences and resulting stories could provide unique insights into public lands’ operations.
 - e) Interior should collaborate with conservation and outdoor recreation groups to encourage regionally-focused – as opposed to industry-focused – combined marketing campaigns for public lands. This action would maximize tourism marketing dollars, helping to advertise visitation opportunities in the parks and therefore increase visitor frequency and attract first time visitors.
2. *Department should create a vocational training initiative for youth and veterans to work on public lands.*

The Committee recommends the Department formalize a program that pairs job coaches with youth and veterans’ organizations to teach vocational skills and environmental stewardship while working through the maintenance backlog and other general maintenance on Department lands and waters. Such a partnership would help ease the burden of Department lands and waters maintenance while opening career pathways for youth and veterans, which could include future positions within the Departments of the Interior or Agriculture. Additionally, past, small-scale projects with the Youth Corps have shown a heightened level of engagement and constituency from participants who have lived and worked in park lands.

Such a program can achieve cost savings for the Department while benefitting America’s youth and veterans, as well as the American public seeking enjoyment of Interior lands and waters. As an example, the National Park Service’s (NPS) maintenance backlog is

indicative of a pent-up opportunity for partnerships to help with the repairs and maintenance necessary to keep our public lands accessible and safe for visitors. These necessary repairs are cataloged in NPS's deferred maintenance backlog, which provides a running list of infrastructure maintenance and repairs that remain unaddressed due to budget constraints.

Further, in an effort to create efficiencies and prevent overlapping and duplicative efforts, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Veterans Affairs should work together, when advantageous and appropriate, on vocational training initiatives.

Linked to our recommendation are specific opportunities for partnership and collaboration, outlined below.

- a) The Boy Scouts of America Order of the Arrow (OA) is a 150,000-member subset of Scouts who are highly motivated and engaged in continuing lifelong service and leadership development. Order of the Arrow members, known as "Arrowman," are partnering with the NPS to carry out a significant national service project on the National Mall in 2023. This project follows previous, successful service projects with U.S. Forest Service, within Agriculture, including 2008 work in Mark Twain National Forest, Manti-La Sal, Washington-Jefferson, Shasta-Trinity, and Bridger-Teton National Forests. Work included trail maintenance and construction, trash removal, and infrastructure repairs. Similarly, the Girl Scouts of America's Ranger Program encourages Girl Scouts to participate in service projects in our national parks. Both the OA and Ranger Programs are possible because of recent memoranda of understanding (MOU) between the scouting organizations and the NPS. The Department should expedite approvals, where appropriate, to work with the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to increase their service projects on public lands throughout the country. The Department should also work toward MOUs between additional sub-agencies and the Scouting organizations.
- b) The Department should consider a new partnership with the recreation industry and the nation's Corps Network to create a Recreation Enhancement Corps (REC Corps). New REC Corps can be easily developed to expand and maintain the country's outdoor recreation assets, work collaboratively to fundraise for major projects, and engage the next generation of recreationists and stewards while developing new career pathways for youth and veterans.

With dedicated support from the Department and industry partners nationally and regionally, REC Corps can scale-up quickly through existing Corps programs, and other NGO partners. REC Corps could engage thousands of new youth and veterans in developing new recreation assets and infrastructure; restoring and maintaining recreation-related properties and historic infrastructure; addressing backlog maintenance and recreation-related conservation projects; and developing the next generation of recreationists while promoting multi-use recreation assets and activities. Taken together, such a program can achieve cost savings for the Department and get important projects done while benefitting America's youth and veterans by opening career pathways in

infrastructure and land management. Potential apprenticeships with existing building trades professionals should be explored to help ensure the long-term sustainability of the program.

In addition, a REC Corps would help to increase economic development in gateway communities. Engaging thousands of new youth and veterans on projects would mean enhanced recreation access and enjoyment for the public and more tourism dollars locally, combined with the additional spending of the Corps on supplies, transportation logistics, etc. having a positive economic impact.

Lastly, the Department should explore additional opportunities to embrace and promote academic curricula – either through local school districts in gateway communities or in partnership with Department of Education – that emphasize outdoor skills development and appreciation. Such emphasis at the K-12 education level could create a pipeline for future corps members.

3. *Department should work closely with local gateway communities to address housing issues critical to utilization and enjoyment of Interior lands and waters.*

Gateway communities often serve as the “front door” to Interior lands and waters, hosting both those engaged in recreation as well as the workforce that is critical to safe and responsible enjoyment. Because of the remote nature of many public lands, visitor lodging and employee housing are often in short supply and are therefore cost prohibitive, which limits the constituencies that are able to visit and fill critical employment gaps. Another limitation is that property owners in gateway communities have an increasing number of renting options for generating revenue. This results in a reduction of properties available to seasonal Interior employees, as well as increased rental costs.

There is an opportunity to build sustaining partnerships with gateway communities that can help to correct this problem. Local communities are most acutely aware of their housing needs, and therefore are positioned to offer valuable insight in the crafting of a solution. The NPS is testing a public-private partnership housing model for seasonal employees in Acadia National Park in Maine. If successful, it could serve as a model throughout the country.

Stronger, more aligned partnerships will also have the intended outcome of promoting economic growth and sustainability within the gateway communities.

Linked to our recommendation are specific strategies for further partnership and collaboration outlined below:

- a) The Department should facilitate regular and robust dialogues with the gateway cities and towns to public lands. These conversations, which could be held during town hall-style meetings, briefings to chambers of commerce, presentations to civic clubs, etc., would provide local elected officials and residents with an outlet to share ideas and voice concerns to the Department. In doing so, they can help to

ensure that the Department is apprised of pertinent information like changes in tourism trends, infrastructure concerns, changes in population that could impact park staffing, and opportunities to partner with local institutions for the benefit of the public lands.

- b) The Department should continue to work with public and private entities to assess opportunities to construct employee housing, either on public lands or in gateway communities. Small, cost-effective, and quickly-constructed, easily retrofitted units could help to solve staffing shortages on public lands. Interior employees that would otherwise not have the means – either because of high cost or burdens of travel – to work in remote geographic locations would benefit from permanent on-site housing, which could make it easier to attract a sufficient number of workers to the parks. Additionally, because some Interior lands only require seasonal, and not year-round, upticks in employment, less permanent housing structures like RVs, trailers, or tent cabins might be sufficient and appropriate. The Committee examined the efforts of a number of housing construction and development partners and encourages the Department to conduct a more thorough review to identify a broad array of potential partners.

Campground Modernization/Expansion

Background

Front-country developed campgrounds, like lodges and marinas, are excellent candidates for partner management under concessions and leases in several Department of the Interior bureaus, including the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). For the NPS, the 1998 Concessions Act and OMB Circular A-76 strongly suggest that needed and appropriate commercial services – where customers pay for specific goods and services – should be provided under concessions contracts.

Camping is a popular recreational activity across the nation, with opportunities both in developed campgrounds and in backcountry areas. Recent research reports that younger and more diverse Americans find stays in campgrounds to be rewarding and desirable, although the research emphasizes that broad recreational participation drives camping participation, not just overnight stays in tents, recreational vehicles, and other offerings. The research notes that in each of the most recent four years, more than a million new family units have made an initial camping trip – and that those families are very representative of the overall U.S. population regarding ethnicity, lifestyles, and more.

There is also broad consensus that the current national park campground system, largely operated by Federal employees, combines inadequate and outmoded visitor infrastructure with a need for both capital and operating subsidies with appropriated funds. Overall capacity has not kept up with growth and changes in camping demand, and the infrastructure that does exist, with few exceptions, fails to meet expectations of the contemporary camping market. National park campgrounds are also the victims of other park infrastructure problems, including roads and water systems. In addition to adverse impacts on visitor experiences, the challenges facing campgrounds make the system an underperforming asset. Data on campgrounds is not centralized and is of varying quality, but evidence suggests that occupancy rates at many campgrounds could grow and additional services, from WiFi to utilities, equipment rentals and camp stores, food and extended family sites are desired and would substantially boost net agency revenues, especially when operational costs are transferred to private sector partners. As a serendipity, private sector operation of the campgrounds would generate a dramatic increase in NPS awareness of visitor characteristics and satisfaction. The lessons learned with near-immediate operational changes in national parks can be then replicated for other Interior bureaus, including the BLM, FWS, the Bureau of Reclamation and, cooperatively, on Native American lands.

The Committee is proud to provide insight into opportunities to enhance the visitor experience for users of the Department's vast network of campgrounds. As supporters of America's great outdoors, we hope to strengthen support for the Department and its lands and waterways through providing memorable and lasting experiences that will engage Americans, generation after generation.

Recommendations

Fortunately, there are ways to cure these problems quickly. Here are key steps to success:

1. *National charette on NPS and other Department of the Interior bureau campgrounds. By assembling experts from the private sector, State campground operators and key Federal officials, a centralized library of information, trends and best practices can be quickly assembled at very low cost and can then become a basis for action;*
2. *A Secretarial challenge can be established and implemented by December 1st, 2019. Parks could nominate campgrounds for selection as one of five to ten pilots for modernization, enhancement or even new construction, especially in park units with low levels of visitor services that now limit public use. The incentive would be an allocation of funds equal to current deferred maintenance, but available for discretionary use to improve the campground and associated infrastructure.*
3. *Multiple operational models for campgrounds can be identified and communicated to park units, along with information that would expedite any NEPA-related reviews. Key to this would be “categorical permissions,” covering key campground components including utility systems. Among the models to be provided would be:*
 - a. *Clear policy enabling campground improvements by existing concessions operators. Key to this would be agreement to provide Leasehold Surrender Interest to allow recovery of private investments or a contract extension to accomplish such amortization;*
 - b. *Issuance of new concessions contracts for campground improvements and operations;*
 - c. *Agreement on pricing, including a core campsite charge automatically adjusted for inflation or other index and market pricing of offered options, including connectivity and utilities; and*
 - d. *Earmarking of campground franchise fees for needed and appropriate NPS services, including education/interpretation, fire and safety and related areas.*
4. *New openness to innovative management and services in campgrounds ranging from mobile food service (including food trucks) to mobile camp stores, specialized zones in campgrounds to maximize visitor satisfaction, innovative overnight operations (tent and small cabin rentals, for example);*
5. *A new focus on high-quality, contemporary campgrounds managed for diversity of experiences and connectivity to park/area offerings (not solely a campground focus);*
6. *Permission for subconcessions agreements to operate campgrounds while still integrating campground management into concessioner marketing and park-wide services including transportation and food;*
7. *Clarification of current practices that offer 50% senior discounts to campers over the age of 62 (established by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act) that apply only to base campsite fees, and introduction of new senior fee blackout periods during peak season periods;*
8. *Use of youth and young veterans service corps and other innovative solutions in campground modernization and maintenance; and*
9. *Coordination and integration, where possible, of campground operations in national parks with campgrounds in gateway communities.*