

FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT

First Triennial Report to Congress
Fiscal Year 2005

Submitted by:

U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park Service
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Bureau of Land Management
Bureau of Reclamation

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Forest Service

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The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act 2006 Report to Congress

Executive Summary

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), enacted by Congress in December of 2004, authorized the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture, and the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation within the Department of the Interior to charge fees on Federal recreation sites which meet certain criteria and reinvest a majority of the revenues into enhancing the site. REA replaced fee authority under the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and integrated several important “lessons learned” from those and other earlier fee authorities. Recreation fees continue to provide a vital source of revenue for improving on-the-ground facilities and services for visitors at national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and a variety of other public lands throughout the nation. Since 1996, recreation fees have generated over \$1.5 billion, and future REA revenue will continue to significantly improve the quality of the visitor experience at Federal recreation sites.

REA will sunset ten years after the date of enactment (in 2014), which allows adequate time for agencies to plan for future projects, ensure those future projects have a strong nexus with the visitor experience, and more effectively plan and manage the program on a sustainable long term basis. In sum, REA program benefits visitors of Federal public lands by:

- Continuing to reinvest 80 percent or more of the fees back into the collection site to enhance visitor services and address the backlog of maintenance needs at recreation facilities;
- Ensuring projects funded with REA fees are connected to the visitor experience;
- Creating a consistent interagency recreational fee program, including sideboards and specific criteria that limit where new recreation fee sites can be established;
- Creating a simplified system of new recreation passes that can be easily identified and used in a consistent manner on lands managed by all participating agencies;
- Providing more opportunities for public and community involvement in determining recreation fee sites and fee levels; and
- Providing options for collaboration with gateway communities through fee management agreements for visitor and recreation services, emergency medical services, and law enforcement services.

While the REA builds upon lessons learned from the Fee Demo program, including the changes noted above, the changes will not likely be noticed by the visiting public. The vast majority of recreation sites will continue to be free.

Section 9 of REA calls for the Secretaries of the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture to submit the first triennial report on REA to Congress by May 1, 2006. The Departments developed this report jointly in response to Congress's directive. This report:

- Highlights the status of the REA program implementation for Federal recreational lands and waters (including budgetary data);
- Provides examples of projects funded using such fees;
- Provides examples of future projects and programs using such fees;
- Evaluates the REA program; and

Section 2 of this report details examples of each agency's current accomplishments and planned future projects using REA revenues. Section 3 discusses the transition from the Fee Demo program to the REA program, which is nearly complete. For example, key REA implementation accomplishments to date include the following:

- The agencies jointly developed and issued a set of implementation guidelines to be used by all of the participating agencies;
- The agencies developed an organizational structure for the Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRACs) that relies largely on existing RACs and creates new RRACs as appropriate for BLM and FS. They also created appropriate interagency agreements to implement the RRAC structure;
- The agencies initiated an acquisition process to obtain the goods and services necessary to establish the new recreation passes; and
- The agencies held numerous outreach and listening sessions to obtain feedback from the public on various aspects of REA implementation. These listening sessions assisted in crafting key provisions in this program.

Section 4 of the report explains the new public participation components of REA, including the use of RRACs in the implementation planning process. Section 5 details the implementation and application of a new family of national recreation passes. Section 6 presents budgetary data for each agency involved in REA. Highlights of this section include:

- Recreation fee revenue has increased substantially over the last nine years, from approximately \$55.3 million in FY 1997 to \$196 million in FY 2005, due to

changes in a variety of factors over time, including the number of sites authorized to collect fees, fee levels, and visitation;

- The average cost of collection as a percentage of total REA revenue decreased in FY 2005 to 18.7 percent, down from a high of 20.7 percent in FY 2003; and
- Total visitation to DOI and FS recreation sites is estimated at over 600 million for FY 2005. This total includes nearly 400 million visits to DOI sites, making this year's visitation the highest in over a decade. FS sites hosted an estimated 205 million visitors.

Recommendations for improvements on REA are not provided in this report because implementation of the new authority is not yet complete. Subsequent triennial reports will provide sufficient data on which to base more extensive evaluations, determine whether administrative or legislative changes should be made, and to provide appropriate recommendations for improving the program.

This has been an exciting year for everyone involved in the Recreation Fee Program. This report reflects the extraordinary efforts and collaboration among the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture and the public to improve visitors' experiences and the management of our Federal recreation lands.