

SUBCOMMITTEE ON RECREATION ENHANCEMENT THROUGH REORGANIZATION

TOPIC: CAMPGROUND MODERNIZATION/EXPANSION

BACKGROUND: front-country developed campgrounds, like lodges and marinas, are excellent candidates for partner management under concessions and leases in several Interior bureaus, including NPS, BLM and 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.

ACTIONS

Camping is a popular recreational activity across the nation, with opportunities both in developed campgrounds and in backcountry areas. Recent research, notably annual surveys of the general public by KOA, the nation's largest provider of camping at private sites, 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, RVs 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 US 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 and 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 Bureau of Land Management, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation and , cooperatively, on American Indian lands.

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

- 1) **National charette on NP/other 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 1.** 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;
 - d. Earmarking of campground franchise fees for needed and appropriate NPS services, including education/interpretation, fire and safety and related.
- 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 (RentMyTent and small cabins, 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) **Confirmation of current practices that 50% senior discounts offered to campers over the age of 62 (established by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act) 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**;
- 9) **Integration of campground operations with NPS and concessioner employee housing solutions**; and
- 10) **Coordination and integration where possible of campground operations in national parks with campgrounds in gateway communities, especially on pricing.**

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