

NEWS



Contact: *Derrick Crandall 202-682-9530*
dcrandall@funoutdoors.com

Date: **July 25, 2013**

Concessioners Say Expanded Visitor Services Are Key to Better National Parks Funding

Washington, D.C. (July 25, 2013) -- The National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA) presented Congressional testimony today expressing strong support for an expansion of visitor services in national parks to enhance the financial resources currently available to the parks. Gerard Gabrys, CEO of Guest Services, Inc. and a member of NPHA's Board of Directors and Executive Committee, delivered the NPHA message during testimony before an oversight hearing of the United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The hearing was focused on sustainable supplementary funding for America's national parks.

Mr. Gabrys praised the Committee for addressing such an important topic in the current difficult federal budgetary climate. "Our national parks are a wonderful shared legacy," he stated. "They should provide outstanding memories and experiences for all Americans long into the future . . . but today's federal budgetary travails make new financial strategies essential to achieving that goal." He explained that national park concessioners have been serving the public for well over a century and now serve some 100 million visitors annually in approximately 160 park units. And, he noted, those services are generating substantial resources for the National Park Service (NPS). "Franchise payments from concessioners to NPS now approach \$100 million annually," he said, "and concessioner marketing and promotion efforts total more than \$10 million." However, as he pointed out, far more can be done to meet the needs of the national parks, to begin to reverse a decades-long decline in park visitation through new outreach and marketing, and to address an estimated \$11 billion backlog in restoration and maintenance.

Mr. Gabrys commended NPS Director Jon Jarvis for the agency's recent efforts to encourage and explore new financial models, but noted as well that the agency needs to eliminate some barriers to introducing appropriate new services. "The visitor services we provide in national parks are often inhibited by NPS policies which limit visitor experiences and reduce our

(more)

Concessioners Call for Expanded Visitor Services Add One, July 25, 2013

payments. . . to the agency,” he said. “The buildings we operate, including lodges, are federally-owned – even though most were originally built with private capital. They are historic in almost every case, and expensive to maintain and operate. They constitute a significant portion of the backlog of deferred maintenance reported by the National Park Service – in excess of a billion dollars. . . Private capital can be attracted to reduce the need for federal appropriations – but doing so would require adequate contract terms and use of the Leasehold Surrender Interest provisions of the 1998 park concessions act. Until very recently, NPS declined to utilize the 20-year contract terms authorized by that statute.”

He called for expanded activities for visitors in national parks, as long as they are appropriate and related to the parks. “We do urge expansion of bike and kayak rentals and tours, of guided wildlife photo trips, of rentable tents and cabins in park campgrounds,” he stated. “These services would make park visits more memorable and enjoyable – and help fund park operations.” Mr. Gabrys also expressed concern about the elimination of current, valued visitor services as had recently been proposed for the Merced River corridor in Yosemite National Park.

Additional NPHA suggestions for enhancing NPS revenues included lengthening operating hours at popular sites like the Statue of Liberty, allowing dynamic pricing of services, upgrading facilities to meet the needs of today’s visitors, enhancing the Guest Donation program, and converting some NPS functions – like the collection of entrance fees and the operation of campgrounds – to concessioner operations. Mr. Gabrys noted that the impact of such changes would be dramatic. “We are confident that increases in visitor services. . . could increase franchise fees to the NPS by 50% within three years,” he said.

Mr. Gabrys ended his testimony on an optimistic note. “We see our work not just as a business but as a commitment to what some call our Nation’s best idea. We feel the challenges facing the national parks and the National Park Service are great, but solvable through partnership efforts of NPS, the National Park Foundation, friends and cooperating organizations – and concessioners.”

To see a video of today’s testimony and to download a copy of the testimony of Mr. Gabrys and other witnesses, go to: <http://www.energy.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/7/full-committee-hearing-funding-the-national-park-system-for-the-next-century>

The National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA) is the national trade association of the businesses that provide lodging, food services, gifts and souvenirs, equipment rentals, transportation and other visitor services in the National Park System. Concessioners have played an important role in creating lasting national park memories for more than 125 years. Concessioners operate in more than 100 national park units with combined sales exceeding \$1 billion annually and \$70 million+ in franchise fees paid to the National Park Service. The in-park concessioner workforce of some 25,000 persons assists visitors an estimated 100 million times annually. Information on national park concessioners is at www.parkpartners.org.