

american **CAMP** association™

**Position Paper on
Public Lands**

Position Statement *Approved 2/22/2005*

The American Camp Association (ACA) supports a legislative and regulatory approach to public lands that provides nonprofit and for-profit camps with fair and equal access to public lands under conditions and regulations that are consistent from one region to another, and provides access to public lands at a fair price — with simplified and reasonable fee structures — including those for camps based on public lands. Furthermore, public land use strategies should also recognize the occasional need for new or short term access by youth serving organizations. In addition, any legislative or regulatory design for public land use should recognize the contributions made by camps for the preservation and stewardship of natural resources and provide all stakeholders, including camps, with the opportunity to have input before decisions are made. Finally, ACA urges continued recognition that the public needs the support of organizations with outdoor expertise to experience public lands fully.

Background

Definition

Public lands are surface land and waterways in the United States that are owned and controlled by a government entity (*i.e.*, Federal, State, regional, county or municipal jurisdiction).¹

U.S. Federal Public Lands

The majority of public lands in the United States are owned by the Federal government and managed by either the Bureau of Land Management under the Secretary of Interior or the U.S. Forest Service under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Parks and Monuments are also public lands managed by the National Park Service, which is also part of the Department of the Interior (DOI). Typically each parcel is governed by its own set of laws and regulations that explain the purpose for which the land was acquired, and how the land may be used.²

The DOI and the Department of Agriculture manage 697 million acres of surface land (about one-fifth of the land in the United States) including:

- 261.9 million acres managed by the Bureau of Land Management
- 96 million acres managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service
- 84.4 million acres managed by the National Park Service
- 193 million acres managed by the US Forest Service³

In 2004, public use of Federal public lands were:

- 68.85 million visits to 3,300 recreational sites provided by the Bureau of Land Management
- 276 million visits to 388 units, including parks, monuments, seashore sites, battlefields and other cultural and recreational sites provided by National Park Service
- 39 million visits to 545 wildlife refuges provided by the Fish and Wildlife Service

- 90 million visits to 308 recreation sites provided by the Bureau of Reclamation ⁴
- 34.8 million visits to sites on US Forest Service Land⁵

State Public Lands

In addition to Federal public lands, each State owns and controls public lands. According to the National Association of State Park Directors:

- There are 5,842 State park areas comprising over 13 million acres
- In 2004 there were 826.5 million visitors to State public lands - 408.6 million visitors to fee areas and 417.9 million to non-fee areas
- 91.2% of all State park visitors were day-time users.
- Overnight users constituted a significant part of the State park attendance – with 67.5 million users. ⁶

Local Area Public Lands

In addition to the public lands owned and controlled by Federal and State governments, local counties and municipalities own and manage public lands. According to the National Recreation and Parks Association, there are approximately 10 million acres of local area public lands. ⁷

Camp Use of Public Lands

Use of public lands is essential for many camps. Although the use of Federal lands by camps is most common in the West, there are camps throughout the country which depend on access to Federal, State and municipal lands for programming. It is estimated that 9% of all camps use public lands for at least a portion of their programming (1% on federal lands, and 8% on other public lands). ⁸

Camps currently using Federal lands do so with “Outfitter Guide” permits. The Outfitter Guide designation includes a wide variety of commercial users who compete for an increasingly limited number of user days. All user days are awarded at the local district/park/regional level and local staff have a great deal of autonomy in how these days are awarded, although historical use is a strong determining factor.

According to Jim Hughes, then Deputy of Director of the Bureau of Land Management, speaking before a Senate hearing concerning Outfitter Guide Permits: “Of the approximately 53 million visitors in 2003, the Department of the Interior estimates that about 1 million employed outfitters and guides while recreating on BLM-managed lands. In FY 2003 alone, the BLM issued over 3000 permits to outfitters and guides for different types of recreational activities across 261 million acres of public land. The BLM collected \$3 million in fees from these permits in FY 2003.” ⁹

Currently, the fee structure for permits is complicated and difficult to understand and is inconsistently applied for nonprofit and for-profit camps. In some areas, nonprofit organizations are not eligible for the longer term special use permits and must reapply for temporary use permits each year.

In addition, there are a number of camps, primarily in the West, whose facilities are actually located on Forest Service land through a Forest Service lease. These camps are threatened by changing Forest Service policies and the threat of increasing lease fees.

Over the past ten years, ACA has worked to create a cooperative relationship with the Forest Service and the National Park Service at a national level. In 1996, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and ACA was signed. In it, the Forest Service and ACA agreed to "... work together to achieve a common goal of increasing public awareness and knowledge of camping opportunities, programs, and projects that may be planned and accomplished on National Forest Lands." ¹⁰ More recent relationships with the Forest Service have been nurtured by the ACA Public Policy Committee. Individual members of ACA have fostered relationships with State and local public lands administrators.

Rationale

Camps teach young people an environmental ethic which includes respect for the natural world and good stewardship. Camp is the only opportunity many children have to spend significant, supervised time in the natural world and to learn minimum impact skills as well as responsible, safe practices in the out-of-doors. In many ways, camps contribute to the well-being of public lands by educating those who will be using these lands in the future.

ACA supports the practice of continuing to provide permits/user days for those camps who have demonstrated responsible practices and good stewardship. Many of these camps have significant investments in private facilities and land, and a disruption in the availability of permits would be a serious discouragement to continue to hold or create these facilities. ACA also supports making special use or longer term permits available to nonprofit organizations as well as to for-profit organizations.

ACA also recognizes that it is becoming increasingly difficult for new or temporary programs to acquire Forest Service permits, and believes that at least a small number of user days should be set aside for youth serving organizations like camps who do not have a record of historic use. In addition, ACA supports the concept of partnerships with public lands organizations where camps would provide volunteer work in trail building and other projects in return for the opportunity to spend time on the public lands.

Fees for permits are often so complicated and inconsistent that it is difficult to create a realistic budget. ACA supports a simplified and reasonable fee structure which is available to nonprofit organizations as well as for-profit camps. Permits should never be awarded on the basis of who makes the highest bid for user days.

Those camps that are located on public lands and demonstrate good stewardship should have a consistent and stable fee structure as well as the availability of long term leases to protect their facility investments and future programming.

Changes which impact Federal public lands use are often made through regulation. Increasingly, developments in public lands use at the State and local levels are also impacting the ability of camps to run their programs. All stakeholders, including camps, should have the opportunity to have input before decisions regarding public lands use at every level are made.

Call to Action

The American Camp Association urges camps to build relationships with local administrators of Federal, State, and locally owned public lands. It is important for camps to be involved and to stay current on proposed regulatory and legislative changes, and to take advantage of public comment periods to make their voices heard. ACA also urges all camps to continuously upgrade and monitor their own practices and instruction to be sure their outdoor practices are environmentally sound.

Notes:

- 1 U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management definition, www.blm.gov
- 2 *Quick Facts*, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2005.
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Ibid
- 5 *US Forest Service Fiscal Year 2005 President's Budget Overview*, US Department of Agriculture, 2004.
- 6 *Fact Sheet*, National Association of State Park Directors, 2005.
- 7 *Frequently Asked Questions*, National Recreation and Parks Association, 2005.
- 8 *2003 Camp Benchmarks*, American Camp Association, 2003
- 9 Transcript of "Testimony of Jim Hughes, Deputy Director Bureau of Land Management United States Department of The Interior Before The Senate Energy And Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee Public Lands And Forests, March 3, 2004".
- 10 *Master Service-Wide Memorandum of Understanding, 95-SMU-197*, United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, February 6, 1996.

Resources:

Maps of all Federal Public Lands, www.publiclands.org/mapcenter/
National Association of State Park Directors, www.naspd.org
Public Lands Information Center, www.publiclands.org
USDA Forest Service, www.fs.fed.us
USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Permit Information, www.fs.fed.us/recreation/permits