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December 7, 2009

U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carolyn Holbrook
Recreation and Heritage Resources Staff
1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Stop 1125
Washington, DC 20250-1125

Dear Ms. Holbrook:

The Escapees organization represents some 65,000 members of the RVing public. Many of our members have no other home than their recreational vehicle, having sold their stick-and-mortar homes in favor of full-time residence in a traveling RV. A large number of our members regularly visit national parks in their travels, and many perform volunteer work at national park facilities all over the country. Because of age, many of our members qualify for, and possess, either the current senior passes or the Golden Age passes, which preceded them.

We were, frankly, shocked when we heard that the U.S. Forest Service plans to eliminate the 50% discount at national forest campgrounds that has traditionally been available to holders of lifetime Senior and Access passes. This program, which is of great benefit to our disabled and to our senior citizens, has been in place since the mid-'60s. Many seniors have paid years ago for their lifetime pass, which promised them access to our national parks for free and also promised to provide camping discounts. To remove or alter those discounts amounts to a breach of that promise.

The 2005 Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), which established the "America the Beautiful" pass program, specified that pre-existing holders of Golden Age and Golden Access passes could continue to use them in accordance with the terms under which they were issued. That means they would be grandfathered in for the 50% discount as long as the original pass is not lost or stolen. But when the new REA-authorized Senior and Access passes became available in 2007, the Forest Service encouraged Golden Age pass holders to turn in their Golden passes, which guaranteed a 50% camping discount, in exchange for an REA pass, which does not, without telling them that they were giving up an important benefit.

We have always believed that offering lifetime passes and substantial discounts to seniors and the disabled is a way of honoring their contributions to our nation and ensuring them access to the benefits of outdoor recreation. This new proposal will not only eliminate that recognition, it will snatch it away from citizens who have already earned it and been promised it. We ask that you reconsider this course of action and find a way to keep your promise to our seniors and disabled. Please do not reduce or remove the existing discounts available to Golden and Access pass holders.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Nemeth', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Nemeth
Escapees RV Club
Director of Consumer Affairs

CC:
Congressman Kevin Brady
Senator John Cornyn
Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson