

Statement of Congressman Joe Heck

May 7, 2013

Natural Resources Subcommittee Hearing on Impediments to Public Recreation on Public Lands

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

More than 85% of my state is owned by the federal government, so Nevadans know how critical public lands are for environmental and recreational purposes. The topic of today's hearing - Impediments to Public Recreation on Public Lands - is an important one.

Nevada's lands have been used for generations by folks who enjoy the many activities the Chairman listed in his opening statement. Our lands should be open for these activities and I thank the Committee for their continued vigilance in this matter.

But I want to turn briefly to another topic related to public lands usage. It is a topic that I am hopeful this Committee will look into more thoroughly in the coming weeks, and that is the issue of bureaucratic impediments to volunteer search and rescue efforts on public lands.

On January 31st 2012, Las Vegas taxi driver Keith Goldberg went missing. Investigators believed that he was killed and the body disposed of in the desert in the vicinity of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Local law enforcement suspended their search when Keith was not found and arrests were made in April 2012. But the Goldberg family still wanted answers. They wanted to find Keith and bring closure to what had been a heart-wrenching experience.

The Goldberg family turned to Red Rock Search and Rescue, a non-profit search and rescue team that helps families like the Goldberg's when loved ones go missing. The team at Red Rock SAR is a trained group of volunteers with extensive experience. The Goldberg's were hopeful that with Red Rock's help they would be able to close this tragic chapter of their lives.

As Red Rock prepared to start their search they ran into a number of bureaucratic road blocks at the National Park Service. Valuable time was consumed with the processes needed to obtain a special use permit and obtain a liability insurance policy.

Recall, this is a trained, non-profit, volunteer, Good Samaritan organization trying to bring closure to a family by searching for their lost family member.....FOR FREE and at no expense to the taxpayer. They provide a valuable community service. They need to be able to get into the public park and make their search.

Some fifteen months after Keith Goldberg disappeared, Red Rock was able to find an insurance policy and obtain the requisite permits that would allow them to start their search.

On April 14th, after less than 2 hours, Red Rock SAR discovered remains that have been matched to Keith Goldberg. The Goldberg family had their closure.

But the Goldberg's story is not unique. Air Force Staff Sergeant Antonio Tucker was presumed drowned in Lake Mead on June 23rd 2012. As the National Park Service searched, they were contacted by the owner of a company specializing in underwater survey and recovery work. He offered to help. He was told the Park Service had all the help it needed. 10 months later, after hiring an attorney, filing a request for public documents, and applying for a special use permit, he was finally cleared to search the lake.

Staff Sergeant Antonio Tucker's body was recovered on April 17th, in less than 2 days. Antonio Tucker's family waited 10 months for closure.

A spokesperson for the Lake Mead National Recreation Area acknowledged the company had more advanced equipment than the service does and stated, "We should be able to utilize their services much more rapidly."

Neither of these examples is intended to be an indictment of the men and women who work at the LMNR, or on any of our public lands: They are dedicated professionals working to the best of their ability within a bureaucratic framework that hinders the acceptance of good Samaritans offering to help.

Having thought about these issues as a former member of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Search and Rescue Team, I am developing legislation that would require the National Park Service and other federal land management agencies to streamline and expedite the permitting process as well as waive any liability insurance requirements for non-profit, accredited search and rescue organizations for the purpose of carrying out privately requested missions on federal lands.

Again, I am hopeful that the Committee will give this matter its due consideration so that families like the Goldberg's and the Tucker's can have the closure they deserve when they are unfortunately faced with a missing loved one.

I thank the Committee for allowing me the chance to testify here today, I look forward to working with you on public land access issues in the future, and yield back my remaining time.