

NATIONAL RECREATION LAKES ACT OF 2001

The National Recreational Lakes Study Commission was created by Public Law 104-333, the "Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996." The Presidentially-appointed commission was given the task of reviewing current and anticipated recreation demand at federally-managed manmade lakes and reservoirs and developing recommendations for enhancing recreational use of these facilities.

Eight commission members were appointed by the President, who also designated former Assistant Secretary of the Interior Bob Armstrong as Chairman. Members included key officials of the Departments of Agriculture and the Army; an official of the Tennessee Valley Authority; a representative of the National Governors' Association; and three citizen representatives, required by law to be familiar with recreation, tourism, conservation, Indian tribes, local government and the development of recreation-related infrastructure. Richard Davies of Arkansas, appointed as a citizen representative, served as Vice Chairman of the Commission. The Interior Department provided financial, administrative and staffing assistance, including office space. Other federal agencies furnished information and personnel.

The commission held public meetings and conducted regional listening sessions. Commissioners and staff appeared at meetings of other organizations with an interest in the Commission's work. Although the commission relied principally on existing data and research, it also engaged in limited new data gathering to address the four specific charges outlined in the 1996 legislation:

- Determine the extent to which individual federal manmade lakes and reservoirs have provided authorized recreation facilities and services;
- Investigate the feasibility of enhancing recreation opportunities at these lakes and reservoirs under existing statutes;
- Review legislative changes that would enhance recreational opportunities consistent with the lakes' other authorized purposes; and
- Recommend ways to enhance recreational opportunities at these lakes, including the establishment of a National Recreational Lakes System which would feature innovative partnership-based agreements between federal agencies, state and local units of government, and the private sector.

The commission's report, "Reservoirs of Opportunity," was submitted to the President, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the House Committees on Resources and Transportation and Infrastructure in June of 1999. It offered the following conclusions:

- Federal lake recreation is a significant national resource and public benefit of federal water projects, making an important contribution to local, state and national economies. These lakes host **900 million visits annually**, generating **\$44 billion in recreation-related spending**;
- Recreation at federal lakes has not been treated as a priority, or often even as an equal with other reservoir uses, despite its status as an authorized purpose;

Recreation management at federal lakes lacks policy direction and leadership as

well as sufficient interagency and intergovernmental planning and coordination;
Recreation facilities at most federal lakes are inadequately maintained, with a \$1 billion maintenance backlog, and are insufficient for today's levels of public use;
Current recreation user fee practices are not particularly successful as a revenue generator; the recreation fee demonstration program offers a model for more successful revenue generation;
Better management will be necessary to meet current and future recreation demand, with or without increased appropriations;
Partnerships with state and local governments and with private businesses need to be expanded and improved;
Concessioner policies at federal lakes are inconsistent and a disservice to the public, which benefits when concessioners are able to operate under conditions that allow them to succeed;
Federal agency policies limiting cost sharing with state and local government partners are unwise;
Reservoir water management, including draw-downs and flow levels, can and should serve recreation and environmental purposes as well;
Clean water is critical to lake recreation as well as lake health; and
The concept of a national recreation lakes system has merit and should be tested through a demonstration program.

The Commission report also offered five major recommendations:

Recreation should be made a higher priority at federal lakes;
Federal recreation lake leadership should be energized and focused through the establishment of a Federal Lakes Recreation Leadership Council;
Federal lake recreation should be advanced through innovation and revised policies;
An environment for federal lake recreation management success should be created;
and
The gap between recreation needs and services should be identified and closed.

Legislation to create a national recreation lakes program will soon be under consideration in both chambers of the Congress. The legislation permits designation of 25 demonstration lakes where innovative practices and partnerships would be encouraged, provides special funding for these lakes and directs federal agencies to insure that operating policies reflect that recreation is an authorized purpose at virtually all federal lakes. In the House, legislation will be introduced by U.S. Representative Nathan Deal (R-GA), whose district includes Lake Sidney Lanier, the Corps of Engineers' most heavily visited lake. Parallel legislation will be introduced in the Senate by Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), whose state also enjoys popular federal lakes. Within the Executive Branch, a Federal Lakes Recreation Leadership Council has been established and, operating under the reinvention laboratory initiative, has designated 31 pilot lakes. The council is co-chaired by the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Director of Civil Works, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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