

America the Beautiful Federal Recreational Land Pass Program Transcript

Introduction:

Good day, and thanks for joining us for this updates to the America the Beautiful, the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass Program. My name is Brandon Flint and I am the Interagency Pass Program Coordinator for the National Park Service. And today we're going to be spending a little bit of time talking about the Interagency Pass Program, going through some updates, and giving some new information about the program as well as giving you the opportunity to ask questions, and hopefully we'll answer those for you today.

Where we would like to start is just to talk about a couple of our goals for our program today. Our primary objective is to be able to provide updates and clarification on the Pass Program as well as a little bit of pending -- or information on pending legislation that can affect the program. We would like to just provide this information really to ensure that there's consistency in how all of the different agencies accept and issue the pass. Because this is still a relatively new Pass Program, we want to make sure the information that we're giving to the public, the way that we're accepting these passes and the way that we're issuing them is as consistent as it can be across all of the agencies.

Like I said earlier, one of the primary reasons we're here today to be able to answer your questions and hopefully clarify some of those things that you may be dealing with out in the field today. But first, what we would really like to do is just express a very big thank you to everybody out there and congratulations. This was a big undertaking to get this Pass Program going and it was a relatively smooth transition. That was because of the hard work of everybody out in the field. It's four different passes than what we had before, across five bureaus, and that pass is now accepted at over 2,000 field locations clear across the country. So it's an impressive program and the fact we've gone pretty much over a year now without any major problems is really a great thing, and again, thank you to everybody out in the field for making this a big success.

To date, we have shipped almost 2 million Interagency Passes out to all of the field sites across the nation, and of those 2 million passes, there are almost a million passes out in the hands of the general public. So it's a big program. Those pass sales have generated over \$25 million for the five participating agencies to do a number of wonderful projects, and so it's been a real big success, and again we just can't say thank you enough to everybody out in the field for taking the time to learn how the program works, figuring out how to issue these passes, and really making the program a success.

Along the way through this first year we've hopefully made some improvements and we've discovered a few bumps here and there, but over this past year we have tried to make some improvements that we think you're going to notice and we think that hopefully is going to make your job easier. Mid-season last year we heard a lot from the field that the passes when they were being displayed in vehicles, in the hot southern areas, those passes would actually start to warp. So mid-season what we did is we increased the thickness of the pass

just a little bit and hopefully this year we won't have so many problems with the passes warping as they're being left out in the sun.

We also heard a lot from the field and from the public that the hangtags, every time they tried to take them down or put them up on the rear-view mirror, that they would rip. So this year the hangtags that you order will be made of a synthetic material, and that synthetic material will hopefully will hold up a little bit better and we won't have to replace so many of those hangtags and people will get a longer life out of them.

Another thing that we heard a lot from the public and from the field site is that there were questions about the wording on the back of the Annual and the Access Pass. That wording said something to the effect of "not honored for camping." And so hopefully with this new change in wording we'll have alleviated that confusion over whether or not and how the discount is applied. So you'll see that this year as you start to order that 2008 stock and as we start to sell through that 2007 stock.

One last thing, and this is a relatively new program improvement, is that online ordering is now available to all of the field sites. Previous the general public could always order passes through USGS. Now if you're a field site that orders your pass stock directly from USGS there is an online ordering option for you as well so that you no longer have to fax or e-mail or call USGS in order to do your bulk orders. So hopefully that will make that process a little bit easier for some field sites out there.

Interagency Pass Program Updates:

Recently we have taken a relatively big step and updated our Interagency Pass Program Standard Operating Procedures. There weren't a whole lot of major changes to the procedures. Mainly it was a few small changes here and there and streamlining the document to make it more useful to you, hopefully a little easier to read, and a little easier to answer those questions that you may have. Like I said, not a whole lot of big changes in there, but a few small things here and there.

We also tried to make the document more user-friendly by pulling out some of the sections and making them stand-alone appendices. So you will see this year the marketing policy is an appendix to the SOP, the Frequently Asked Questions have been added as an appendices, and there was also the Statement of Disability which is an appendices to the SOP. Now, the Statement of Disability, some of you may have noticed the current form we were using had an expiration date that had passed. The new form with a new SOP gives us an expiration date on that form of February 2011. So you ought to stop using the old form and start using this new form. It's essentially the same thing but there are a few small changes to it and we have better approval for us to use that through February of 2011.

Now, one change that I do want to just briefly mention, and there's more information in the Standard Operating Procedures about it, as well as a memo that went out to all National Park Service field sites, and that's that the NPS has changed our upgrade policy. In the past, NPS sites would upgrade park-specific seven day or standard entrance receipts to the

Interagency Annual Pass. That was the only thing that we would allow. This year, with the issuance of this new SOP, parks will now be able to upgrade park-specific annual passes to the new Interagency Annual Pass as well. So the examples would be, in the past if somebody went to Grand Canyon National Park and paid \$25 and then went to Zion and changed their mind and wanted to go ahead and upgrade to the Interagency Annual Pass and pay that additional amount, that was allowed. But they weren't allowed to do it with the park-specific annual.

So today, somebody goes to Grand Canyon National Park, they purchase that \$50 park-specific annual pass, and then they go to Zion and decide, "Oh, for \$30 more I could have had the Interagency Annual Pass," Zion National Park starting this year will be able to go ahead and upgrade that pass. So I don't want to spend a whole lot of time on that, but that's a pretty significant change for the Park Service sites. Again, it's the National Park Service only that is offering any kind of upgrades. All of other field sites, all other agencies will continue to not offer those upgrades. So if somebody goes to a National Forest or someplace outside of the National Park system and tries to bring that receipt in, those still won't be upgraded. And the same is true, if somebody goes to a National Park site and then goes to a National Forest or a Wildlife Refuge, the Wildlife Refuge, of course, will not be able to upgrade those as well. It's a park-specific policy. So again, there is information in the SOP and a memo that went out, and that's all available on the TEL website.

So I think that's, hopefully, the big updates and the things that you really need to know about the SOP. Like I said, go through it. Not a whole lot of changes but a few things through that.

Motorcycle Pass Updates:

So now we're going to just kind of start talking a little bit about some of the issues and some of the questions that we got throughout the year about the Pass Program in general and acceptance of the passes. The first thing that I would like to talk about is motorcycles and how we accept the pass when a motorcycle presents themselves. Really, the simplest way to remember this is the number of signature lines on the pass determines how many motorcycles may enter per pass.

So in the case of the annual pass, there are two signature lines on the annual pass, so the pass could potentially have two owners. If those two owners came to a fee area and were on separate motorcycles, both pass holders will be able to come into that area using the one pass.

The Senior Access and Volunteer Pass each have one signature line so only one motorcycle would be able to come in on that pass. Now, for the National Park Service, again, this may be more of a change than some of the others, but really what it's based on is the fact that the Code of Federal Regulations says that a motorcycle is a vehicle, and in many cases in the park sites, vehicles were being charged on a per-person rate or at a vehicle rate. It was a little bit haphazard. As we work in the future, the National Park Service will be implementing motorcycle-specific rates at each of the National Parks and

that's part of our pricing model.

Parks that aren't there yet should continue to work under the current system and wait until the next time that they are able to introduce new fees, and we don't know exactly when that's going to be, but eventually all parks will be moving to have a separate motorcycle rate. But in the meantime, again, it's really thinking about the pass. Two signatures on the pass equals two motorcycles. One signature on a pass equals one motorcycle.

General Pass Guidelines:

In general, when we talk about pass acceptance, there's a couple of rules or guidelines that we can talk about for all the passes, and that's the general acceptance categories. All passes in general will cover entrance to Fish-&-Wildlife Service sites and National Park Service sites that charge an entrance fee. The passes will also cover the use of BLM, Bureau of Land Management, Reclamation and Forest Service sites that charge a standard amenity fee.

So those two different fees can be charged a couple different ways. In many cases, the entrance fee or the standard amenity fee will be charged per vehicle, and in that case, everybody in the vehicle is admitted into the area for free if they have a pass. So as long as it's a noncommercial vehicle- it could be an RV, it could be a motor home, it could be a small van, it can be a car- everybody in that vehicle is allowed to enter at a site if the site is charging per vehicle.

Now, the other way that those two fees can commonly be charged is per person, or per visit. In those cases, the pass will admit the pass holder and three additional people, not to exceed a total of four adults. So somebody comes up and you're a site that charges per person, they present their pass, it's going to be them, the person whose presented their passes, three additional people, and always remember children under the age of 16 continue to be admitted for free. So that's the General Pass. That's generally what your pass is going to get you in for.

Interagency Pass Update:

We have four different types of passes. The first is the Interagency Annual Pass. That pass is available to anyone at a cost of \$80. This is the pass that essentially replaced both the Golden Eagle and National Parks passes. This pass should be available at all sites that charge an entrance or standard amenity fee. So if you have a fee essentially to access your site, it's an entrance fee or standard amenity fee, you need to have these passes either available at the site or somewhere nearby so people have different options for how they're going to pay.

Different from the old Pass Programs, all of these passes, all of these annual passes, need to be validated at the time of sale. To do that, you need to punch out the current month as well as have a visitor sign the pass right there while you're selling it to them. The second signature can be added at any time, but right when you sell that pass, go ahead and punch out the date, have the visitor sign it, and then send them on their way.

Now once in a while we'll get a question about, "Well, if it's the last day of the month, should we go ahead and punch it for the next month?" The answer is, no, you shouldn't. Go ahead and punch it for current month. Even if it's the last day of April or last day of May, punch it for that current month because the visitor will always receive 12 full months of use out of that pass.

And as I noted, it's a pass that any two people can sign. There doesn't need to be any kind of a relationship. They don't need to be husband and wife. They don't even need to be friends. Just any two people can sign the pass. The first signature is at the time of sale, the second signature at any time. It doesn't need to be in the presence of the issuing officer.

Senior Pass:

Moving on is the Senior Pass. Now, the Senior Pass replaced the Golden Age Passport. This is a pass that must be purchased in person because it has eligibility requirements. This is a lifetime pass that's available for \$10 to U.S. citizens or permanent residents who are age 62 or older. In order to qualify for this pass, you need to come in person, bring some sort of proof of age as well as proof of citizenship or permanent residency.

Interagency Access Pass:

The next pass that I want to touch on is the Interagency Access Pass. That again is a lifetime pass. It's a free pass that's issued to U.S. citizens or permanent residents regardless of age if they have a permanent disability that severely limits them in their life.

Again, this is a pass that's similar to the Senior Pass in that it can only have one signature, and that one signature or name on that pass needs to be the person that has a disability. We'll touch on that again in a moment. But just like the Senior Pass as well, the Interagency Access Pass does offer a discount on some expended amenity fees. Visitors, once again, should always be encouraged to check locally for discount information.

Now, how do we deal with this pass when somebody comes up and says, "I have a disability. Do I qualify for the pass?" In order to be eligible for this pass, as I mentioned, the person needs to have a permanent disability that severely limits them in their life. So when somebody comes up and says, "I need to find out about this Access Pass and whether or not I qualify," your first question to them should be, "Well, do you have documentation? Do you have a letter from a physician that says that you have a disability and that that's a permanent disability that limits you in your life? Or do you have documentation from the Social Security Administration or the VA? Or do you have some sort of documentation from a state or local rehab organization or something along those lines that once again says that this is a permanent disability that severely limits you in your life?"

Now, the truth of the matter is, many visitors, as you're packing for your vacation and thinking about your vacation, they're not thinking about bringing documentation of their disability, if they have one, with them. So many times when a visitor shows up at your site, they're simply not going to have that documentation available. So that's why we have the

Statement of Disability, which is a self certification and allows people to say, "Yes, I have a disability, it's a permanent disability that severely limits me in my life, but I just couldn't bring the documentation. I didn't have the documentation with me." So, again, your first question should be: "Do you have documentation?"

If not, then that Statement of Disability is your fallback position. A lot of sites will find that it's useful to read the Statement of Disability to the person who is the potential applicant so that they really understand that it is -- what it is that the disability needs to be, that it's permanent and it severely limits them in their life. So another question that we get once in a while is from the VA, or from people from the VA who have a disability and they have a letter that says it's a 20 percent disability or it's a 40 percent disability. What is the percentage that qualifies somebody for an Access Pass? And the answer is there isn't one set percentage or anything along those lines. Again, the qualification is, it's a permanent disability that severely limits somebody in their life.

So if somebody comes up with a letter from the VA that says that this person has a 30 percent disability and that's all it says and you're not sure whether or not that it's a permanent disability, that's a great time again to get out that Statement of Disability, either have the person read it and sign it, or read it to them and then have them sign it, and then go ahead and issue them the pass at that point.

I just want to touch on briefly, too, that again, this pass can be issued to anybody regardless of their age. So it could be issued to somebody under the age of 16, and then that would allow the whole family in with that person. Again, the Statement of Disability would probably be useful in this point. The parent or guardian or person traveling with this person who has the disability can sign the Statement of Disability for the other person on their behalf as long as they can verify that, yes, this person does have that permanent disability. And then the name that actually goes on the card should be the name of the person with the disability. And then that card is that person's, the person with the disability's card, and they need to be in the area or in the general vicinity in order for the card to be used. So again, kind of a quick overview of the Interagency Access Pass... a wonderful benefit for those people who qualify for it.

Volunteer Pass:

The last pass that we're going to talk about is the Volunteer Pass, and that's a brand new pass to the program last year. It's something that we didn't have in the previous pass program. That's a free pass for volunteers who contribute over 500 hours to one of the five participating agencies. It's similar again to the Access and the Senior Pass in that it only has one signature, but this is a 12-month or an annual pass.

Again, just like any of the annual passes, this pass should be punched with an expiration month at the time of issue and it should also have a signature of the volunteer who has earned it at the time of issue. Now, who is responsible for tracking all of these volunteers and their hours? The answer is the volunteer coordinator or the supervisor. Whoever that volunteer is working for, and the volunteer themselves to some degree, is responsible for

tracking their hours and figuring out when the volunteer has accumulated that 500-hour or reached that 500-hour mark.

At that point, the volunteer coordinator or the volunteer supervisor should work with whoever at the recreation site orders passes to go ahead and order a Volunteer Pass at that point. Now, we know there have been a few questions about this 500-hour requirement and what hours count and so on because it's a new Pass Program and we think that there's going to be a lot more people who actually reach that 500 hour mark this year. The 500 hours had to be contributed after January 1st, 2007. That's the date that the program started.

After a volunteer is awarded a pass, after they reach that 500 hours and they're awarded a pass, they must wait another 12 months and give an additional 500 hours in order for them to earn the next Volunteer Pass. So we can only be issuing a Volunteer Pass every 12 months if they've reached that 500-hour mark. Once a pass is issued, the volunteer hours reset back to zero, and I think I said it a couple of times, then they need to get to that 500-hour mark again in order to be issued the new pass.

So we know there were a few questions, and it was a little tough to maybe visualize that, so in the new SOP you will see that we've tried to explain that a little bit better and we've given you an example. The example is Brooke Trout, and she was volunteering for one of the Federal agencies. She started in January of 2008. For that first 10 months, so by October, Brooke had actually volunteered 500 hours at this particular site. So she talked to her volunteer coordinator. Her volunteer coordinator got her a pass. And in October, Brooke was issued the pass. At that point, her volunteer hours reset back to zero. So then from October 2008 until October of 2009, during that 12-month period, Brooke was able to volunteer over a thousand hours at the Federal recreation site. So when she got to the 500 hour mark, she wasn't immediately awarded another pass because she still had a Volunteer Pass. She waited and the volunteer coordinator waited until October of 2009 and then issued her a pass at that point, and then once again her hours reset back to zero on October of 2009. So then after October 9, through 2010, Brooke wasn't able to volunteer as many hours as she was in the previous year, and during that 12-month period Brooke had only volunteered 400 hours. So at that point, that next October rolls around, they don't issue Brooke a new pass, she needs to get that additional 100 hours in order for her to receive her new pass.

So hopefully through our illustration here, and then again there's more information in the updated SOP that will hopefully help you understand that 500-hour limit -- or excuse me, that 500-hour requirement and how to issue the passes. There have also been a few questions about tracking hours and how to do that. Especially as volunteers are moving from agency to agency and site to site, there are volunteer coordinators in the Washington Office for both the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture, and those volunteer coordinators are working on creating a database that will assist sites in tracking hours of their volunteers. We don't have a whole lot of information on it now, but they're working real diligently to get that done in order to help us track our volunteers' hours. So

sometime in the not-too-distant future we hope that the interagency volunteer managers will be able to get that database up and going and they will provide more information to the field as that database goes live and you're able to use that.

Hangtags and Decals:

Hangtags and the decals; just to touch on those real quick, the decals currently can only be issued to the two annual passes, the Volunteer Pass and the Interagency Annual Pass. The decals are available to people who have open-topped vehicles or motorcycles, and they're issued to those vehicles because it's not practical to be able to hang the pass or display the pass in them because somebody would steal it.

So as a reminder, the number of signature lines on the pass determines how many decals the pass is eligible for. So when you're issuing a decal, somebody may come into your station and say, "I've got a motorcycle here and I need to -- I would like to get a decal for that." So what you would do then is check their I.D., make sure that that matches the pass and then also make sure that that matches everything else, and then you can go ahead and issue the decal.

So the one thing to remember, though, is every time you issue a decal, on the side of the pass you will see two stars on the Annual Pass, one star on the Volunteer Pass. Make sure you punch out those two stars if you issue two decals or make sure you punch out one star if you issue one decal, because we really want to limit the number of decals people are getting so that there's not decals floating all over the place and people aren't giving them to their neighbors and whatever else.

Now, the other thing I mentioned is the hangtag. This is an example of a hangtag right here. This again is used at unstaffed areas. They are available to people so that they can hang their pass up in their rear-view mirror and display the fact that they have this pass at an unstaffed area. So again, like I've said, we've updated those and hopefully they won't have as many problems with them tearing and everthing there.

The other thing that we would like to encourage sites to do this year, in the past it's been a little more optional, but we would really like to encourage everybody to give out a hangtag with every pass that's sold. And the reason for that is that people as they're traveling around may get to an unstaffed area that they didn't know they were going to be going to. And so once they get to that unstaffed area, they have no way to get their hangtag unless they travel to find an open ranger station or someplace to get it. So we're encouraging everybody, as you can, and as space and time allows, to make sure that you're issuing a hangtag with every pass, and that would be all four of the passes. Go ahead and issue them a hangtag with each one of those that you sell.

Customer Service:

Just want to touch on customer service real quick and making sure that we're taking time with visitors as they come to our parks, as they come to our forests and wildlife refuges and public lands, that we're taking the time to greet them and as we're explaining the area and

the entrance fee options, that we're helping people understand this Pass Program and what options there are for them to pay.

As time allows, we'd encourage you to ask questions. If a visitor comes up and you look and it's a car full of people and you look in the backseat and maybe there's somebody who is a little older back there, go ahead and ask that vehicle, "Hey," you know, "is there somebody in the vehicle who is over the age of 62? If there is we have this great pass for them." If somebody pulls up and you notice in that their window they have a placard indicating somebody may have a disability, again, it's maybe a cue that you could ask, "I noticed you have a placard in your window. Does somebody in the car have a disability?" And try to start that discussion with these people to help them understand that there are these other passes available to them.

If somebody comes up to you and they're talking about entrance fees, you're welcoming them to the park, you know, "Hi, welcome to Grand Canyon National Park, the entrance fee is \$20," or you know, throwing in there the option "we also have annual passes you may be interested in" to help people understand that there's more options than just paying the entrance fee. As I noted in the beginning of the program, the NPS is the only agency right now that's doing upgrades. So in many cases, after a person has made their purchase, they might find out later that what they purchased the first time isn't maybe what they really wanted. So take that extra few minutes when you have it. We know that it's busy out there sometimes and maybe those opportunities aren't always there. But when they are, make sure you take the opportunity to help people understand and make the right choice the first time. Because that's real important in keeping people happy and making sure that they know that we in the Federal agencies are being responsible and providing wonderful customer service to everybody out there.

Old Golden and NP Passes:

Just want to touch briefly on the old Pass Program, and that was the Golden Eagle Passport, Golden Age Passport, Golden Access Passport and the National Parks passes.

As you all know, those programs ended last year, and we stopped issuing the passes. If you're going through your safes or through your pass stocks and you find any of these old Golden passes or any old National Parks passes, you need to destroy those passes and make sure that you keep the appropriate records according to your agency guidelines. But you should no longer be issuing any of these passes for any reason.

If somebody comes in and we're upgrading their pass or we're exchanging their pass, all of those upgrades and exchanges need to be done with the new passes. So, again, all of the old passes, you should no longer be issuing those for any reason.

Now, we will continue to see a lot of those old passes. We'll continue to see the Golden Age and Golden Access passes for quite some time, and we are encouraging visitors, if you have a paper Golden Age Passport or a paper Golden Access Passport, to go ahead and exchange those. But as a reminder, those old paper passes, those Golden Age and

Golden Access passes are still valid and can be used. We're only encouraging visitors to exchange those for new the plastic ones.

A lot of times a senior may have had his pass for 20 years and he loves that old paper pass for whatever reason, and he doesn't want to exchange it for the new pass. That's just fine. But in the instances where they do, where that old pass is getting kind of ratty and tattered, go ahead and exchange it for the new pass. Now, if you do exchange one of those old paper passes, you do need to take that old pass and keep it for your records so that you have proof of that exchange and your records balance out at the end.

But once again, it's encouraged but it is not required for people to get rid of those old paper passes. The plastic Golden Age, the plastic Golden Access passes will continue to be valid. There is no need to exchange them because they have all of the information that we need. They're plastic and they have the magnetic strip on the side. Just incidentally, if you're seeing any National Parks passes or any Golden Eagle Passports, those should have expired at this point and would no longer be valid for entry.