



FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE
NATIONAL PARK RANGERS LODGE
P.O. BOX 1481
TWIN HARTE, CA 95383

January 27, 2008

Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
Secretary of the Interior
U. S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N. W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Ranger Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police represents the majority of field law enforcement rangers in the National Park Service. We are writing to vigorously oppose the effort by Senators Crapo, Baucus and others to allow visitors to our National Parks to carry loaded weapons where such use is otherwise prohibited by federal laws and regulations.

I have read the Senator's letter to you advocating such a change in regulation. There are several factual inaccuracies:

- Visitors are, in fact, allowed to transport weapons through our National Parks either in their vehicles or, when traveling to hunting areas that are only accessible by park trails, on their person or pack animals. We ask only that those weapons be unloaded and not immediately accessible while in the park or monument.
- As field rangers who contact tens of thousands of visitors to our National Parks each year we can, with authority, state that there is almost no confusion caused by what the Senators refer to as "inconsistencies in firearms regulations" among the different federal lands people may visit. Most parks have signs posted at the entrance stations clearly asking visitors to make sure their firearms are unloaded. Almost all trail entrances to backcountry and wilderness have similar signs telling visitors that firearms are prohibited. In our direct experience, almost all visitors recognize that National Parks are special places and require different regulations for their preservation. It is a rare visitor who is confused by this. We know of none who have objected to this reasonable requirement because it is "burdensome."

We are greatly concerned about the impact of such a regulatory change on our ability to ensure public and ranger safety, as well as our ability to effectively protect our wildlife from poaching.

As you know, our National Parks are the last islands of safe habitat for our nation's wildlife. Although we agree that most gun owners are law abiding, it is our experience that people – especially young people – carrying loaded weapons on open federal lands have a tendency to use those weapons to shoot at targets of opportunity as they drive. Because park wildlife is not hunted, the animals are often comfortable remaining in sight of humans and vehicles as they graze or travel. The ability to see wildlife in their natural habitat is one of the truly great educational opportunities parks offer the visiting public. There is no question that opportunity would be seriously threatened by the even occasional and illegal shooting at wildlife we are convinced will happen should this proposed change be approved.

Informing park visitors, as they enter the park, that weapons must be unloaded and stored immediately creates a critical distinction between other federal lands and a National Park. It tells the visitor that parks are special places and must be treated accordingly. It is significant that it is only in parks – where such gun regulations exist – that visitors are routinely able view deer, bear and other species. This is at the core of our mission to preserve and protect our parks for future generations.

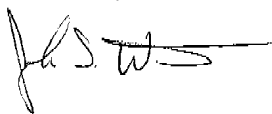
Further, poaching on National Park lands is epidemic and ranger staff is already overwhelmed. We cannot effectively patrol our boundaries, roads and wilderness to adequately protect the wildlife we are charged with preserving. Under current laws, the presence of a loaded weapon in a vehicle or in the possession of a hiker is, many times, a critical clue which allows our rangers to investigate further to find if poaching or other illegal activity is taking place. If you adopt this change, that vital tool is removed and put our parks' wildlife at even greater risk. That is unacceptable to our mission.

It also seems as if the Senators are suggesting that loaded weapons be allowed in the designated Wilderness of our National Parks and Monuments. In most wilderness and backcountry areas of the NPS, possession of a weapon is prohibited, loaded or not except, as noted, to briefly transport weapons while traveling to a hunting area outside NPS boundaries. Allowing loaded weapons where, for decades, they have previously been prohibited would appear be a huge change in a park's ability to protect wildlife and visitors in the tens of thousands of square miles of inadequately patrolled wilderness under our jurisdiction. If this is, in fact, a consequence of the regulatory change suggested by Senators Crapo *et al*, the Ranger Lodge believes that the potentially increased ecological threat to wildlife is sufficient to require review as a possible violation of the intent of the Wilderness Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Finally, crime statistics show that the presence of a loaded weapon greatly increases the chance that it might be used in the heat of a domestic dispute. Unfortunately, we respond to an alarming number of such disputes in our campgrounds, inholdings and commercial lodging each year. Even without loaded guns available to the people involved, responding to and diffusing such situations is extremely dangerous to both the families camping in the area and the responding rangers. Two years ago, to protect himself and nearby families, a ranger was forced to shoot and kill an individual involved in a domestic dispute in a campground. The suspect had a club. Had he been armed with a gun, the situation would have been far, far worse. Our members are certain that the low incidence of violent crime in our National Parks is a direct result of parks being viewed as places where guns are discouraged and loaded guns are prohibited.

As law enforcement rangers, charged with protecting our National Parks and Monuments, the Ranger Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police firmly believes that, in a nation too often subject to random gun violence, our parks are a refuge for not only wildlife, but as peaceful havens to our citizens as well. For the safety of the visiting public, our rangers, park employees and, especially, for the continued preservation of our nation's wildlife, we urge you to reject this proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John T. Waterman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John T. Waterman
President
Ranger Lodge, Fraternal Order of Police

cc: Senators Akaka and Feinstein, Representatives Grijalva and Dicks