

JOHN R. CURTIS
3RD DISTRICT, UTAH

ENERGY AND COMMERCE
NATURAL RESOURCES

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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June 3, 2024

Thomas J. Vilsack, Secretary
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Outfitter and Guide Permits on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write today with serious concerns regarding the management of outfitter and guide permits on the Salt Lake Ranger District (SLRD) of the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest (UWCNF). For many years, there have been unnecessary limitations imposed on outfitters and guides seeking to operate in this Ranger District. Before members of Congress became involved several years ago, the guides themselves made lengthy and sincere efforts to address these issues with the Supervisor of this forest, David Whittekiend. I enclose attached documentation of those efforts with this correspondence. We write you today because the SLRD has continued to limit access to the Forest. Most recently, the SLRD instituted an unnecessary moratorium on temporary permit holders in the Lone Peak Wilderness, which will also apply to priority permit holders at permit renewal. Furthermore, the SLRD has declined to take steps to issue long-term permits that would resolve many of these issues.

While members of Congress and guides have tried to work with the SLRD, we regret that none of the solutions suggested have met with Mr. Whittekiend's approval. On the one occasion the Supervisor did agree to Congressman Curtis's request to rescind the termination of all temporary guide and outfitter permits last year, he subsequently revoked the guides' and outfitters' access to the Lone Peak Wilderness area where guides have worked for decades. The explanation provided by the Supervisor contradicted his own decision to allow guiding in this area just two years prior. The fact that the Supervisor revoked and then reinstated access to this area in 2022, and is now doing so again, causes confusion among the public and the guides, interferes with public access to education and safety leadership, and disrupts the activities of hard-working local business owners and their employees.

The guides and outfitters who serve the public through your permit system are instrumental in providing access to forest lands for people who are not able to visit on their own, whether due to a lack of experience, skills, or equipment. It is important to remember these people are part of the public we serve, and the public deserves an opportunity to experience their public lands with the assistance of a guide. The guides also promote safety education and Leave No Trace practices which directly support the goals of the US Forest Service. Uneducated visitors in a dangerous backcountry environment are a threat to themselves and others, potentially straining search and rescue resources.

The two primary concerns that have arisen in the last year involve: (1) the revocation of access to the Lone Peak Wilderness area, which has been available to guides for decades prior, and (2) the ongoing lack of long-term priority use permits. The reasons given for both actions appear vacuous and contradictory.

The basis provided for the inability to issue long-term permits (at an in-person meeting with the forest service supervisor, his staff, Congressman Curtis and his staff, and several guides and outfitters on November 21, 2023) was lack of personnel. Implementing more long-term permits would considerably alleviate the workload for agency staff (and guides) by reducing the frequency of permit renewals from every six months to every ten years. The group pointed out that the Forest Service Enterprise Program was created to assist local staff with projects such as the development of long-term permit opportunities (see <https://www.fs.usda.gov/enterprise/skills-and-services.php>). The group questioned why permanent priority permits were not forthcoming to save the extra work associated with the reissuance of temporary permits each year and pointed to the Enterprise Program as a potential resource to develop long-term permits. Nothing was accepted as a satisfactory resolution. Only after Congressman Curtis described the Supervisor's position as unacceptable did Mr. Whittekiend indicate he would consider alternatives, including assuring Congressman Curtis he would work toward the development of more long-term priority permit opportunities for the temporary permittees.

Also of great concern, when winter season temporary permits were issued in January of this year, approximately 8 weeks after the November 21 meeting, the permits unexpectedly excluded the Lone Peak Wilderness. This came as a great shock to the guides, to us, and the to the public. Outfitting and guiding activities have occurred in this wilderness area for decades, and for good reason—there are highly desirable climbing, skiing, hiking, and camping opportunities that the public wishes to experience with the expertise of a guide. The guides' and outfitters' dismay at this development is unsurprising, as this issue was reviewed and addressed in 2022 when access had previously been revoked, then reinstated. The 2022 Letter To File (attached), interpreting the 2003 Wasatch-Cache Land and Resource Management Plan, states:

Given our reliance on outfitting and guiding companies to provide the valuable educational services to the public, the increased use of climbing areas in wilderness, and the increased visitation of recreational visitors in the Salt Lake Ranger District, *it appears to be contradictory to limit outfitter and guiding companies if the desired future condition is to have a well-educated public that uses National Forest system lands.* (emphasis added).

This language shows that in 2022 the Supervisor recognized that outfitters and guides are important for educating the public, particularly as more people visit the forest. Nothing has changed since 2022 to warrant this change in position. Congressman Curtis wrote a letter to Mr. Whittekiend requesting that he follow his prior 2022 interpretation and remove the prohibition on outfitting and guiding in the SLRD Lone Peak Wilderness (see letter of March 28, 2024, attached). Mr. Whittekiend refused, and specifically blamed Congressman Curtis's prior request as part of the basis for this new decision. *"This approach was necessary to expedite the request by your office and local outfitter and guides to issue winter temporary outfitter and guiding permits."*

Learning to innovate and be creative in solving challenges is something we do well in Utah and which this local office seems to resist. We, the Utah delegation, would appreciate any assistance your

office can provide in reinstating outfitting and guiding access to the Lone Peak Wilderness and taking steps toward the development of long-term outfitting and guiding permits on the Salt Lake Ranger District. Thank you for your attention to these very important issues.

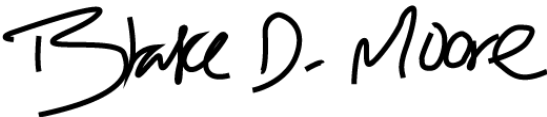
Sincerely,



John R. Curtis
Member of Congress



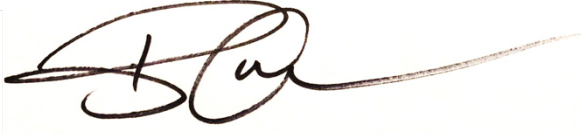
Michael S. Lee
United States Senate



Blake D. Moore
Member of Congress



Mitt Romney
United States Senate



Burgess Owens
Member of Congress



Celeste Maloy
Member of Congress

Cc: Randy Moore, Chief USDA Forest Service
Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary Natural Resources and Environment, USDA
Chris French, Deputy Chief, National Forest System
Gordie Blum, Director of Recreation WWSR, Lands and Minerals, Forest Service
Mary Farnsworth, Regional Forester Intermountain Region 4, US Forest Service
Dave Whittekiend, Supervisor Wasatch-Uinta-Cache National Forest
Renee Flanagan, Public Services Group Leader Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest

ATTACHMENTS

1. 2022 Letter to file by David Whittekiend
2. October 19, 2023, letter to US Forest Service leadership
3. November 3, 2023, USFS Briefing paper re. temporary guide permits
4. December 8, 2023, letter from Supervisor David Whittekiend granting temporary guide permits
5. March 28, 2024, letter to Supervisor David Whittekiend re. Lone Peak Wilderness
6. April 10, 2024, letter from Supervisor David Whittekiend re. Lone Peak Wilderness