

this matter and others between our respective committees.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL D. ROGERS,
Chairman.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,
Washington, DC, December 16, 2024.

Hon. MIKE ROGERS,
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services,
Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: I write regarding H.R. 3396, the "Fire Department Repayment Act of 2023," which was ordered reported by the Committee on Natural Resources on December 6, 2023.

I recognize that the bill contains provisions that fall within the jurisdiction of the Committee on Armed Services and appreciate your willingness to forgo further consideration of the bill. I acknowledge that the Committee on Armed Services will not formally consider H.R. 3396 and agree that the inaction of your Committee with respect to the bill does not waive any jurisdiction over the subject matter contained therein.

I will ensure that your committee will be appropriately consulted and involved as this resolution or similar legislation moves forward so that you may address any remaining issues in your jurisdiction. I will ensure that our exchange of letters is included in the Congressional Record during floor consideration of the bill. I appreciate your cooperation regarding this legislation.

Sincerely,

BRUCE WESTERMAN,
Chairman.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of this Fire Department Repayment Act introduced by my colleague from California, Representative JOSH HARDER.

The bill would require the Secretaries of Agriculture, Interior, Homeland Security, and Defense to establish standard operating procedures for fire suppression cost-share agreements under the Reciprocal Fire Protection Act.

With the increasing threat of climate change and with wildfires becoming more rampant, it is critical that our local and State fire organizations are supported and continue to receive the resources that they need to fight wildfires.

That is why this bill would enable local and State fire departments to maintain their readiness and effectiveness by establishing standard operating procedures to expedite the process for reviewing and modifying existing fire suppression cost agreements to align with cooperative fire protection agreements.

Furthermore, the bill would require the Secretaries to complete second-level reviews of a fire suppression cost-share agreement following containment of a wildfire in consultation with State and local fire suppression organizations.

The establishment of standard operating procedures is a necessary step toward ensuring quicker and more efficient reviews so that local and State fire departments receive Federal reimbursements in a more timely manner.

As fire seasons continue to increase in frequency and severity, Congress

needs to do everything we can to support our local and State fire departments and their firefighters.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to vote "yes" on this legislation, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I am prepared to close. I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from California (Mr. HARDER), who is the author of this important bill.

Mr. HARDER of California. Mr. Speaker, I thank Mr. HUFFMAN for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of my bill, the Fire Department Repayment Act. This legislation cuts red tape and fixes the burdensome fire department repayment system to ensure our local departments are repaid quickly for their work to keep our communities safe.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, the wildfire crisis is getting longer and more intense every year. Sixty thousand communities in the United States are at risk for wildland fires in newly populated, recently developed areas that border fire-prone fields and forests.

My home State of California is on the front lines of this crisis with the most neighborhoods threatened by wildfires.

When a wildfire breaks out on Federal lands, our local firefighters are often the first on the scene, braving hazardous conditions to put out these blazes and protect nearby homes, families, and communities. Local fire departments deploy personnel, use fire engines, and spend thousands of dollars' worth of time and resources to fight fires on Federal lands.

Yet, the bureaucratic Federal reimbursement process is slow and covered in red tape. It often takes years for small fire departments to be repaid for their assistance on these fires.

In my own district, fire departments have waited years and years for repayment from Federal agencies. That has drained their budgets and restrained their resources to combat the fires that we are fighting just this year.

That is unacceptable. Our government must work better for the heroes who put their lives on the line to keep our families safe.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to pass this bill to ensure our local fire departments are paid back quickly so they have the tools they need to protect our communities from the next fire. I also thank my colleagues, Mr. CURTIS and Mr. LAMALFA, for their tireless leadership and support of this important bill.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, in closing, this is a commonsense, bipartisan bill that would benefit our local fire departments and improve our response to wildfires nationwide.

Mr. Speaker, I urge adoption of this bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. WESTERMAN) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 3396, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

MILITARY FAMILIES NATIONAL PARKS ACCESS ENHANCEMENT ACT

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 9516) to amend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act to provide for lifetime National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes for family members of members of the Armed Forces who lost their lives while serving their country, as amended.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 9516

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Military Families National Parks Access Enhancement Act".

SEC. 2. LIFETIME PASSES.

Section 805(b)(2) of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (16 U.S.C. 6804(b)(2)) is amended by adding at the end the following:

"(D) Any individual who is a survivor entitled to—

"(i) a death gratuity under section 1475 of title 10, United States Code; or

"(ii) dependency and indemnity compensation under chapter 13 of title 38, United States Code."

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. WESTERMAN) and the gentleman from California (Mr. HUFFMAN) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Arkansas.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and to include extraneous material on H.R. 9516, the bill now under consideration.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Arkansas?

There was no objection.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 9516, the Military Families National Parks Access Enhancement Act. This bill, which is led by Representative CHAVEZ-DEREMER, expands access to free, lifetime passes to our national parks and public lands to Gold Star next of kin and families of veterans who pass away due to a service-related illness or injury.

Across the Nation, military families play a critical role in protecting our freedoms. They are the strongest base of support for the brave military servicemembers who risk their lives defending America.

When these troops make the ultimate sacrifice for our country, the emotional impact on their families is devastating. While nothing can replace a lost loved one, outdoor recreation has a proven track record of providing at least some measure of relief in times of profound tragedy.

In 2021, Congress permanently codified free lifetime passes to our national parks and public lands for Gold Star families in the Alexander Lofgren Veterans in Parks Act, a bill I proudly cosponsored and helped champion through the Natural Resources Committee.

Unfortunately, the eligibility for these passes excluded families whose relatives were killed in incidents such as hazardous training accidents or due to a service-related illness.

H.R. 9516, however, will expand access to free lifetime America the Beautiful passes to Gold Star next-of-kin family members and family members of fallen veterans. This legislation is a meaningful way to support additional families whose loved ones were lost in their selfless service to our Nation.

I commend Representative CHAVEZ-DEREMER for spearheading this noble effort. Throughout this Congress, Representative CHAVEZ-DEREMER has demonstrated exemplary public service by working tirelessly with Members on both sides of the aisle to better serve her constituents. She introduced this bill after receiving outreach from a constituent family whose loved one passed away on Active Duty but was not eligible for these passes. Her advocacy on behalf of her constituents and our military families is commendable.

Mr. Speaker, I reiterate my strong support for this bill, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I support this bill. The America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass covers entrance fees and day-use fees at national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests, and other Federal recreational lands.

Of these, the military lifetime pass, or Gold Star pass, is a free lifetime pass available to our veterans and certain Gold Star families who have lost a family member during military service, the ultimate sacrifice, as the chairman mentioned. However, the Gold Star pass currently includes certain limitations regarding who qualifies.

This bill would expand eligibility for the lifetime Gold Star pass to include next-of-kin family members of fallen servicemembers who are not currently eligible. Specifically, this legislation would expand access to families of servicemembers who died in Inactive-

or Active-Duty training or in travel to or from training or duty stations.

Mr. Speaker, this bill would ensure that all those who have lost a family member in connection to their military service have access to our national parks and lands.

Those who have sacrificed so much for our Nation deserve this access to appreciate the wonders of our parks, historic sites, and natural beauty across the country. It is imperative that we ensure this benefit is not limited based on how a servicemember died during their service.

Mr. Speaker, I support the passage of this bill, and I urge my colleagues to do the same. I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Mr. Speaker, in closing, once again, I thank Representative CHAVEZ-DEREMER for her efforts to introduce this meaningful legislation. This bill would help reduce the financial burden on our military families who want to visit our national parks and expand their access to the healing powers of outdoor recreation.

Mr. Speaker, I urge the adoption of this legislation, and I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. WESTERMAN) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 9516, as amended.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill, as amended, was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

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RECOGNIZING HAL B. GOODE ON HIS RETIREMENT

(Mr. COMER asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. COMER. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize my good friend, Mr. Hal B. Goode of Washington County, on his well-deserved retirement as the executive director of the Central Kentucky Community Action Council.

Hal will be retiring after an extraordinary 6½ years of incredible leadership, where he has expanded vital community service outreach across multiple Kentucky counties, including many in the First Congressional District of Kentucky.

Under his direction, Hal has spearheaded numerous achievements, including opening two new Head Start facilities in my district, in Springfield and Lebanon.

The success of the Central Kentucky Community Action Council is a testament to Hal's belief that their service to those in need is a hand up, not a handout.

His ability to develop relationships with local communities has laid a

strong foundation for the CKCAC's future progress.

I thank Hal for his dedication to central Kentucky and wish him nothing but the best in a well-deserved retirement.

CONGRATULATING SAVANNAH BUSINESS LEADER DAVID PADDISON

(Mr. CARTER of Georgia asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. CARTER of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Savannah business leader David Paddison, recipient of the 2025 Leadership Award from the Southeast Georgia Leadership Forum.

Mr. Paddison serves as the president of Sterling Seacrest Pritchard, a private insurance brokerage and employee benefits consulting firm in the southeastern United States.

Not only has David achieved business success during his more than 30-year career, but he has also advocated for community involvement and support of nonprofit organizations.

As a Savannah native, Mr. Paddison has been a leader on many boards within his community. He has served as the chair of the Savannah Economic Development Authority, Union Mission, the Armstrong State Foundation, and he currently holds numerous other board positions.

Along with his wife, Jeanne, Mr. Paddison founded the Savannah Wildlife Rescue Center to provide rescue and rehabilitation resources to the region's animals.

I sincerely congratulate Mr. Paddison for receiving this honorable award and for his outstanding contributions to the Savannah community. I congratulate my friend.

CELEBRATING THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CITY OF SUWANEE, GEORGIA

(Mr. CLYDE asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. CLYDE. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the city of Suwanee in Gwinnett County, Georgia.

Folks have called Suwanee home for over 200 years, with Suwanee Old Town dating back as far as 1817. Yet, it wasn't until 1949 that Suwanee was officially chartered. At that time, the city was roughly 3.1 square miles, consisting of just a few hundred residents.

In the 75 years since, Suwanee has flourished, more than tripling in size, and expanding its population to over 22,000 Georgians. The once small agricultural town now boasts a charming downtown community, many prosperous businesses, and beautiful parks, offering an exceptional place for families to live and work.