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The Role of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Recreation

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The American Recreation Coalition (ARC) was delighted to welcome Mike Enschede, Chief of Operations for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Directorate of Civil Works, as the special guest for the May 2008 Recreation Exchange. Mr. Enschede focused his remarks on the factors impacting the Corps' ability to continue offering outstanding recreation experiences. The USACE manages over 460 lakes, mostly in eastern urban areas, said Mr. Enschede. "We have a tremendous number of visitors," remarked Mr. Enschede. Currently, the Corps manages 56,000 miles of shoreline and hosts nearly 400 million recreation visits annually.

Mr. Enschede addressed the intense competition for recreation resource funding. "With the President's agenda to balance the budget by 2012, support the War on Terror and now provide economic stimulus, where will the funding for our recreation operations and infrastructure come from?" he asked. Mr. Enschede predicted that the recent increase in gas prices will create an "interesting difficulty for us," as families put off cross-country trips and stay closer to home, increasing the visitation to the Corps' near-urban projects.

An internal USACE team recently reviewed 4,500 recreation sites -- 2,200 run by county, city, and state partners and 2,300 managed by the Corps -- according to Mr. Enschede. "With a flat budget, we must reduce our footprint and that means closures, modifying hours of operations or transfers of operations," he said. He explained how the Corps managers take pride in providing services to the public and are concerned by threats to these operations. Mr. Enschede cited an example of closures in the southeastern Arkansas. Congress responded with an interest in special appropriations to avoid the closures -- a one-time fix, but Mr. Enschede believes that the solution is not special, one-time funding. Instead, he argued that the Corps needs to change its operations strategy.

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The Corps leadership has been presented with a new recreation strategy developed by Corps staff and a diverse group of recreation and conservation organizations, he said. Lt. General Robert Van Antwerp, Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of USACE, accepted the strategy and has now requested an implementation plan, said Mr. Enschede. The strategy helps relate the USACE recreation efforts to broader USACE and Department of Defense priorities, he explained, noting that Army recruitment has been seriously impacted by reductions of its physically fit candidates. He also noted that USACE is emphasizing the benefits of Corps facilities for military families, citing them as great locations for inexpensive rest and relaxation outings before a return to duty and separations.

Mr. Enschede highlighted the economic benefits of the Corps projects, using the example of Lake Cumberland in southeast Kentucky. The lake is the largest water storage area east of the Mississippi River, explained Mr. Enschede. The lake was recently drawn down 43 feet for dam repairs, requiring 48 boat ramp extensions. But the lake was not closed to recreation because it generates \$155 million annually for the local economy. Mr. Enschede emphasized the need to better highlight the benefits of the Corps recreation projects.

He closed his comments by drawing the group's attention to the latest legislation coming from the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources for a recreation pass for active and reserve military, which would discount or waive the admission fee to public land operations. Much to Mr. Enschede's dismay, USACE sites are not included in this legislation because of committee jurisdiction – an irony that could leave the Corps unable to offer or accept the new military public lands pass.

The group asked questions following Mr. Enschede's remarks. When asked about the USACE's ability to respond to changes in recreation demand, he responded that the agency is seeking a fee program with retention of funds for development and enhancement of facilities and he expected the USACE Research and Development Center to continue to help assess changes.

Mr. Enschede was asked to address diversification of the nation's population and new demands for recreational opportunities. He acknowledged the demand for new and multi-lingual signage, for new types of facilities and for more education on fish and game laws. "We are tweaking areas to accommodate all types of users," said Mr. Enschede.

The budget constraints in regards to the management of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway were questioned. Mr. Enschede informed the group of a \$170 million drop in the navigation budget and noted a trend of focusing on projects that maximize their return on the dollar. "There will not be the constant degree of maintenance as in the past. We will see shoaling and a decline in shoreline stabilization," he reported.

When asked about the competition between recreation and other purposes in lake-management decisions, Mr. Enschede replied that recreation is an authorized purpose of USACE projects and with a performance-based budget, the value of recreation is being considered much more than in the past.

Mr. Enschede concluded with an answer regarding private recreation investment

at Corps sites. He told the group that USACE will take a new look at partnerships with private entities within the parameters which the federal government allows, he said, noting that condos and timeshares are not seen as compatible with USACE operations, but hotels, marinas and restaurants all can be.

Next month, Mr. Enschede will head to Iraq for his second tour, overseeing a huge construction effort ranging from roads to schools to hospitals. He expects to return to his current post in December 2008. A career employee of USACE, Mr. Enschede began as a ranger and site manager and has had important assignments in Washington, D.C., and the Nashville District. He also served as a key staff member of the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors in 1985 and 1986.

Recreation Exchanges are hosted in Washington, D.C. by the American Recreation Coalition, featuring guests who are influencing recreation policy in America. Information on past and future programs is available at: www.funoutdoors.com

If you would like to contact Mike Enschede, he can be reached as follows:

Mike Enschede
Chief of Operations, Civil Works
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
HQUSACE (CECW-CO)
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20314
(202) 761-1983 Fax:(202) 761-5096
michael.g.enschede@usace.army.mil

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