

Jerome couple exemplifies Americans' volunteer service

Fred and Carol Fender of Jerome have made taking care of our nation's public lands a cornerstone of their retirement years. They are a model for us all.



Gale Norton



Dirk Kempthorne

As volunteers at the Bureau of Land Management's Mackay Reservoir Recreation Site for the past eight years, they have greeted the public, educated visitors and undertaken maintenance and cleaning projects. Together, they have donated more than 12,000 hours, the equivalent of six years of 40-hour work weeks.

Volunteers like the Fenders are a primary reason America's parks, refuges, national forests and other public lands are among the finest in the world. Rain or shine, they quietly perform a labor of love with no reward other than the joy of serving others and taking care of their country's treasures. They know that one person can make a difference.

The U.S. Department of the Interior has launched the "Take Pride in America" program, a national partnership to empower volunteers from every part of America to improve parks, refuges, recreation areas and cultural and historical sites on federal, state and local lands. The program will inspire citizen stewardship through a bold and innovative communica-

tion campaign and honor outstanding volunteer efforts.

Part of the President's USA Freedom Corps volunteer service initiative, the program also will work with governors and other partners to launch volunteer conservation projects.

There is a place for virtually every American in this program, which is modeled after the original "Take Pride" program begun in the 1980s. During the program's six-year existence, Americans volunteered more than 10 million hours to restore public lands.

Many state, county and municipal governments and service organizations have signed on as formal Take Pride partners.

For the park ranger, refuge manager, forester or other federal or state land manager, these volunteers are not just valuable, they are increasingly essential.

The Interior Department, for example, now manages nearly one in every five acres in America, from Yellowstone to the Everglades to the Statue of Liberty. With more and more people visiting these lands every year, we need more Americans to follow the Fenders' lead.

Take Pride in America will recognize outstanding volunteers. People who donate their time and labor will

receive a volunteer service certificate after 100 hours of service, an award from the appropriate federal agency after 2,000 hours, and an award from the appropriate Cabinet secretary after 3,000 hours. Volunteers, like the Fenders, who donate 4,000 public service hours in a Take Pride endeavor become eligible for the new Presidential Take Pride in America Award.

The new initiative will also create a Master Volunteers Program, enlisting the specialized skills and talents of experienced professionals to help mentor youth and volunteer groups.

In addition, it will take advantage of the Internet. A new Take Pride Web site will be updated daily to provide partnership opportunities and ongoing success stories. We hope that it will become the hub of a Take Pride community in cyberspace.

We are confident the Take Pride program will succeed because the American people are the world's most enthusiastic volunteers. Anyone who is interested in the program can find further information at www.takepride.gov.

Working together, we will embrace the message in the program's slogan: "It's your land — lend a hand!"

Gale Norton is secretary of the interior. Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne is co-chairman of Take Pride in America's Council of Governors.