



Opening Statement
Full Committee Hearing: National Park Service Centennial Legislation
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
December 8, 2015

Good morning. We'll call the hearing to order.

I'd like to thank you all for being here with us this morning. We're considering legislation related to the upcoming National Park Service Centennial. The bill that we have before us today is the administration's proposal, titled *the National Park Service Centennial Act*. Senator Cantwell has introduced as S. 2257.

I think just about everybody in the room knows and certainly the word is out that 2016 will mark the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. This is certainly a time to celebrate the park service's stewardship of America's most magnificent natural landscapes, including many of our most important cultural and historical places, and the public's enjoyment of them.

I know that I'm going to be getting out to visit the parks in my state. This year was a great opportunity to get out to Denali and go into the park in the fall. It's exceptionally beautiful particularly when you wake up and it's covered in snow. It's one of those opportunities that you just don't forget. Last year we had the opportunity in Wrangell-St. Elias to enjoy yet another amazing park. So I want to get my National Park Service passport stamped in multiple locations. As much as I hope we will all go out and visit our national parks next year, that's only part of what this centennial calls for. More importantly, it offers us a chance to ensure the national park system's sustainability for the next 100 years to come is in place. I think it will take a serious effort to achieve that goal.

The National Park Service was created in 1916 to manage the growing number of park units established by congress and monuments proclaimed by the president. Back then we had just 35 units; today the system has grown to 409 units. The park service administers over 80 million acres of federal land in the United States, with about two-thirds, or 54 million acres, located in my state of Alaska.

As the park system has grown, so has its backlog of its maintenance projects. The National Park Service estimates its maintenance backlog at approximately \$11.5 billion right now. It's anticipated that the backlog will continue to grow as the result of additional land acquisitions, combined with the unavoidable effects of increased visitor use, inflation, and asset deterioration.

The maintenance backlog is a travesty that I think we recognize must be addressed. To me, there is little point in conserving lands or allowing the federal government to acquire even more land if we're not going to take the proper care of those lands. So caring for these lands is as important as anything.

I want to be very clear. I don't think this that is an instance where we can simply throw money at the problem and consider it solved. I disagree that simply providing more funding, as the administration

proposes, is the best approach for dealing with the maintenance backlog. Our nation is facing a very serious fiscal crisis; we can't simply spend however much we want, on whatever we want, whenever we perceive a need. Instead, we need to look at new and alternative ways to fund the parks system, strive to be more efficient with appropriated dollars, and reassess our current funding priorities.

One area that we have discussed before, and that I am encouraged to see picked up, at least in concept in this legislative proposal, are ideas to encourage philanthropic support and leverage private donations for NPS programs and projects. I think that we need to do a better job of encouraging folks who care about the park system to contribute both their resources and their dollars.

I am particularly interested in the endowment idea that we see included here. An endowment can be a great tool to ensure long-term viability if it's structured properly.

And of course, the next 100 years are not just about maintenance backlogs and resource projects. As I mentioned earlier, the park service has a huge presence in Alaska and it's probably not surprising that there are tensions that arise when we try to reconcile the local needs and culture with that of a landlord that is situated almost 4,000 miles away. While the issues we face in Alaska may be different from those faced by the neighbors of Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan, the next century will also be about visitors and connecting the next generation to our parks.

We need to enhance and expand visitor services to meet the demands of this next generation. And that may require some new tools.

I am interested in learning more about the pilot program that this legislation seeks to establish, to allow the Visitor Services Management Authority to award and manage contracts for the operation of commercial visitor services programs and activities.

With the National Park Service Centennial upon us, it is time that we get serious about the future of the park system. The administration's proposal is a start. I know our colleague, Senator Portman, has also been working very hard on these issues not just on this committee but for years prior to this. We already have proven that we can work well within committee. And I think that all of us, drafting bipartisan legislation to put the park service on the path to long-term viability, would be a perfect gift at its 100th birthday.

I'd like to thank Director Jarvis, and the other witnesses who have come to be with us before the committee today. I look forward to hearing your testimony and now I'd like to turn to Senator Cantwell.

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