



Statement of Theresa Pierno,
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Before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
On S. 2257, National Park Service Centennial Act
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Chairwoman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell and members of the committee, I am Theresa Pierno, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). On behalf of our more than one million members and supporters across the country, I thank you for inviting me to testify today at this important hearing. Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading, independent, private citizen voice in support of promoting, protecting and enhancing America's national parks for present and future generations.

First, we would like to thank you, Senators Murkowski and Cantwell, for your efforts to address the National Park Service's funding needs including your commitment to reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund and create a new fund to address the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog. Both are important to provide long term protection and enhance visitor experiences in America's national parks. We can't thank you enough for stepping up to address these critically important issues.

We are looking forward to discussing the Administration's bill to enhance the National Park System just in time for the Centennial. NPCA supports S. 2257, The National Park Service Centennial Act, and would like this bill to be a critical component of the now bicameral and bipartisan effort to pass legislation that will address many funding needs facing the National Park Service. We sincerely hope Congress can agree to a set of policies to significantly address the fiscal needs of the parks, as well as help connect a new, diverse generation to our national treasures. Now is the time to reinvest in our national parks and support "America's best idea."

NPCA is particularly supportive of provisions that have the potential to provide significant additional resources for our national parks, including the Centennial Challenge Fund that leverages federal dollars in order to maximize non-federal, private sources of funds. In addition, we support the establishment of—and

investment in—an endowment to provide a path toward improved long-term fiscal health of our national parks.

NPCA is a member of the National Parks Second Century Action Coalition, a large and diverse coalition of conservation, tourism, business, and others, that support the concepts in this testimony. The coalition has weighed in with this committee numerous times to emphasize our strong support for this effort.

Centennial Opportunity

The 2016 Centennial of the National Park Service is an opportunity transcending partisan, regional and ideological differences for everyone in Congress to come together to do something very positive and historic for America that future generations can look back and be proud. Protecting our national investment requires a new dedication to the parks by Congress, and the Centennial is an historic opportunity for Congress to find common ground to provide needed resources for our national parks.

The concept of what Wallace Stegner appropriately called “America’s Best Idea” started with the establishment of the first national preserve for the enjoyment of the American people at Yosemite during the height of the Civil War. This was followed by the designation of Yellowstone, the world’s first national park, in 1872. In 1916, President Wilson signed the bill establishing the National Park Service. Now nearly 100 years later, our nation has invested in these beloved American treasures that are the envy of many throughout the world. Our National Park System includes unforgettable natural treasures and recreational resources like Yosemite, Denali, Olympic and the Great Smoky Mountains; hallowed ground like Gettysburg and Fort Sumter; important landmarks commemorating and interpreting our nation’s triumphs and tragedies, from the Manhattan Project to the Trail of Tears.

These are all places with almost universal public support recognizing them as nationally significant and worthy of protection for the current and future generations. National parks retell the stories of our ancestors while also providing a space for inspiration and renewal. They also create lifetime memories for families and friends.

In addition to their intrinsic benefits, national parks are also huge economic assets and job producers for local communities and for our national recreation and tourism economies. Areas within the National Park System are key contributors to a \$646 billion outdoor recreation economy, providing nearly \$30 billion in direct economic benefits, as well as nearly a quarter of a million jobs, annually. Our national parks are investments worth preserving and bolstering.

Polling that NPCA and National Park Hospitality commissioned with Hart Research Associates and Northstar Opinion Research in 2012 indicated that public attitudes about our national parks are extraordinarily supportive. Ninety-five

percent of voters—including 98% of Democrats, 91% of Republications, and 93% of Independents—believe the protection of our national parks is an appropriate role for the federal government. Additionally, 92 percent of those polled also stated that park funding should not be cut. The polling experts indicated that national parks are unique in their bipartisan support and for bipartisan action.

NPCA and our partners are enthused about this bill that is so critical to supporting national parks because it helps address their considerable financial challenges.

Underinvestment

We would be remiss not to acknowledge that for decades now, Congress has largely underinvested in our national parks. In today's dollars, the funding to operate the National Park Service has decreased by 7% (\$178 million) in five years, leading to insufficient rangers and other staff to educate visitors and protect resources. In addition, the National Park Service's construction budget has declined by 62% (\$230 million) over the last decade in today's dollars. These reductions, as well as an insufficient investment in national park roads and other transportation infrastructure through the transportation bill, have significantly contributed to growing deferred maintenance backlog.

Although funding is insufficient, the investments we have made in our parks over a century are quite significant. We still see the success of investments made during the Great Depression through the Civilian Conservation Corps with many of the roads, bridges, trails and other facilities in our national parks and a legacy left that continues to benefit millions of visitors today. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service, the Eisenhower Administration launched *Mission 66*, a commitment of \$1 billion to improve visitors services through infrastructure projects including visitor centers, roads, utilities, and employee housing. The \$1 billion initiative that President Eisenhower launched is worth more than \$7 billion in today's dollars. Many of these 50-year old facilities are in need of repair and updating for today's visitors.

Reinvestment in our National Parks

The George W. Bush Administration recognized the importance of providing a robust core operating budget to preserve our national parks and their assets and in 2008 proposed an additional \$100 million per year in discretionary funding over ten years. That effort produced important and necessary investments for the following three years, but then stalled. Since then, all the gains made in those three years have largely disappeared, which drove the Obama Administration to propose a budget that would begin to retake that lost financial ground. The omnibus appropriations bill and transportation bill currently under consideration are immediate opportunities to bolster the funding parks so desperately need. The investments proposed in this bill are critical to supplementing appropriations and transportation funding, but should by no means be used to supplant current funding streams.

NPCA is particularly supportive of the funding provisions in S. 2257 that have the potential to provide significant additional resources for our national parks as well as provisions that clarify, strengthen and expand authorities to better connect a new, diverse generation to our national treasures. I would like to focus on the following provisions:

Centennial Challenge Fund

NPCA strongly supports the establishment of a Centennial Challenge Fund, an innovative program that offers matching federal dollars to encourage private individuals, foundations, businesses and others to donate funds to help restore and improve our national parks. The Bush Administration originally proposed this concept, in addition to the proposed discretionary investment above, to leverage private dollars with federal investments over 10 years. With the original announcement of the program, the Department of the Interior received pledges exceeding \$300 million from non-federal parties, demonstrating the significant public interest in, and potential for, such a partnership program. The initial investment in the program, which stalled with the change in administration, yielded approximately \$90 million—including nearly \$40 million in federal commitments that leveraged nearly \$50 million from nonfederal sources in fiscal years 2008 and 2010. This investment—though far short of the proposed \$2 billion partnership—supported centennial projects that educated and engaged youth and restored park trails and historic buildings.

As a start in FY15, Congress provided a \$10 million reinvestment in the Centennial Challenge in discretionary funding which was matched by \$16 million in private contributions. Over 100 projects were selected throughout the country for maintenance needs and to engage youth.

Examples of projects funded by the Challenge since FY 2008 include:

1. Grand Teton National Park: Funding helped repair a historic retaining wall, trail segments and two heavily used bridges in the Hidden Falls and Inspiration Point areas on the Jenny Lake Trail. Total cost: \$206,000; partner match: 50%.
2. Yosemite National Park: Funding will improve hydrology related to roads and trails to benefit the giant sequoias; modify the Mariposa Grove Road near the south entrance to enhance safety and traffic flow; add new accessible parking spaces; provide two miles of new pedestrian trail; and restore nearly four acres of giant sequoias and wetland habitats. Total cost: \$5.1 million; partner match: 80%.
3. Yellowstone National Park: Funding helped restore and enhance the original and only year-round entrance to the world's first national park by improving walkways, reducing traffic congestion and updating signs. Total cost: \$2 million; partner match: 75%.
4. Boston National Historical Park: Funding completed the critically-needed

restoration of wooden cupola sections of the Old State House, replaced outdated heating and cooling systems, and provided handicap accessibility to the building. Total cost: \$1.4 million; partner match: 50%.

5. Cuyahoga Valley National Park: Funding built the park's first off-road, single-track bicycle and hike trail. This trail, called the East Rim Trail, is part of a network of major regional bicycle and hiking trails for the public to enjoy. Total cost: 382,000; partner match: 52%

The proposal being considered today would establish this program over three years. Providing a dedicated funding stream would allow partners additional time and certainty to raise the matching funds. We support using the proposed increase in the senior pass from a \$10 lifetime pass to an \$80 lifetime pass to seed the Centennial Challenge Fund. This is in line with the current price of the annual America the Beautiful Pass, but the senior pass would remain a lifetime pass.

In addition to this funding source, we encourage the committee to continue to investigate additional revenue sources to more robustly invest in the Centennial Challenge Fund over the three years or extend the life of the Centennial Challenge program over ten years at a smaller amount. We recognize that these are austere times and that identifying offsets can be very difficult, but establishing dedicated funding would make a final centennial bill considerably more robust and effective. Based on the broad support among American voters for park funding that we cited earlier in this testimony, NPCA believes the public would enthusiastically support such funding.

National Park Foundation Endowment

NPCA also supports an endowment to provide long term financial support for the national parks by investing monetary gifts and other contributions to be used in the future for projects and activities that support the national parks. In 2008, NPCA convened an independent, blue ribbon commission of park experts to develop a 21st century vision for the National Park System. One of the commission's recommendations was to create a national parks endowment.

We recommend that to ensure the long-term viability of an endowment, the percentage of withdrawn funds to be used in a given year should be comparable to other endowments. The corpus of the endowment needs time to build, so the amount removed on a yearly basis should be minimal. Therefore, the endowment is not a viable solution to addressing the backlog in the near term. However, an endowment could be particularly well-suited to address other needs down the road, such as investments in science, education and interpretation, and resource protection.

Second Century Infrastructure Fund

NPCA also supports the proposed Second Century Infrastructure Fund, a critically needed mandatory investment of \$300 million a year for three years to directly address the most critical non-transportation-related projects in the \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog.

As this committee has recognized, an infrastructure fund is needed to more significantly address the backlog. In this bill, we wholeheartedly support the proposal to provide it with certainty through a mandatory funding stream.

We are all aware that approximately \$2 billion is needed to address the critical non-transportation projects in the National Park System. These are projects in desperate need of repair, as they impose a risk to public safety and health and are essential for resource protection and preservation. Examples are roof, water treatment infrastructure, and bridge repair.

Education and Interpretation

NPCA supports efforts to recognize the importance of national parks as places of learning by enhancing interpretation and education programs. The national parks serve as some of the best places for active learning from being engrossed in lessons about our nation's history as well as about our natural landscapes and ecosystems within.

NPCA also supports efforts to provide additional opportunities for volunteers in our nation's treasures. The National Park Service depend on volunteers to help protect and restore our national parks. Some financial resources are needed to educate and manage this large and growing number of volunteers.

Public Land Corps Amendments

NPCA also supports amendments to The Public Lands Corps Act of 1993 to increase the eligibility of youth, including veterans, to participate in the Public Lands Corp and extend non-competitive hiring status to former Public Land Corps members to two years. The National Park Service has seen significant savings from the use of conservation corps for various projects. Given the ability of such strategies to stretch scarce dollars, this will allow the national parks to foster additional support and engage additional young Americans to be the next generation of stewards to our national lands.

Conclusion

Today, the National Park Service budget is 1/15th of one percent of the federal budget. In 1981, it was 1/8th of one percent. Congress and the Administration should be investing in things that produce jobs and help our economy, and enhance our quality of life. National parks are such investments.

The Centennial of our National Park Service provides an historic opportunity for members of Congress to work together to provide leadership to protect the places that truly constitute the best that America has to offer. We appreciate the dedicated efforts of Senators Murkowski, Cantwell, Portman and other committee members and their staff to finding bipartisan solutions to address the fiscal needs of our national parks.

Passage of a bipartisan centennial bill coupled with additional investments through appropriations and transportation bills, will ensure our parks are better prepared to serve another 100 years and beyond. We look forward to working with members of the committee and its House counterpart to ensure final passage of a bipartisan National Park Service Centennial Bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.