

Statement of Maria Burks
Coalition to Protect America's National Parks
Subcommittee on National Parks, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
"Moving into a Second Century of Service:
Working to Improve the National Park Service Workplace Environment"

June 7, 2017

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss ways to improve the workplace environment of the National Park Service (NPS). I am a member of the Executive Council of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, having retired in 2012 after a 39-year career with the Park Service. The Coalition is comprised of 1,300 members who collectively have more than 30,000 years of experience managing and protecting national parks. We believe that our parks and public lands represent the very best of America, and advocate for their protection.

During the National Park Service's Centennial year in 2016, over 324 million people visited our 417 national parks in all 50 states and several territories. While this record-breaking attendance was no doubt fueled by the Centennial celebration, it also is a reflection of the importance that these significant natural, cultural, and historic places have in the mind of the American public.

And it is only through the dedication of over 23,000 employees and 400,000 volunteers that the National Park Service is able to ensure that these special places are enjoyed by the public throughout the year. This dedication to the mission of the National Park Service by its employees is reflected annually in surveys of the public expressing high satisfaction with our national parks and their visits to them. It also is reflected in employee surveys that show employees of the service are proud of their work and are deeply committed to its mission.

As with any large organization with so many employees in places throughout the country – many in remote locations – you will find individuals who make poor decisions and engage in misconduct. These situations need to be addressed promptly and decisively. However, these instances should not overshadow the work performed every day, year in and year out, by the vast majority of the service's employees as they welcome visitors, manage and interpret the resources being protected in each of our parks, and carry out the programs Congress established to protect our nation's natural and cultural heritage.

This does not mean there is no room for improvement. In fact, representing many past employees who dedicated their careers to the Park Service, we have seen areas where actions can be taken to create a better workplace on a daily basis. I will focus on some of these specific areas and provide suggestions that will help address shortcomings in the workplace.

Annual Funding: For employees to be able to perform their jobs and to have our parks accessible to the American public, there must be adequate funding from Congress. The proposed FY 18 budget just released by the Trump Administration calls for a cut of 13 percent from the funding received in the current fiscal year, representing a reduction of almost \$400 million and a

loss of another 1,200 positions at a time when there are already 2,000 positions vacant. These cuts will hit parks, program offices, and central offices, as the budget calls for further reductions beyond those already undertaken in the 1990s when there were fewer parks and program responsibilities for the Park Service. And these cuts are coming at a time when we have seen visitation rise from 277 million in 2011 to 324 million last year. If adopted, the FY 18 budget will result in reduced hours of park operations, more deferred maintenance resulting in run-down facilities, inadequate staffing leading to fewer visitor services, and decreasing morale for employees already stretched to the breaking point. These reductions must be resisted.

Central Oversight: The administration's budget proposal to decrease staffing in central and regional offices will make oversight much worse. In 1994, the NPS reduced central office staffing by 1,300 positions and consolidated 10 regions down to 7 regions. Central and regional office oversight is particularly important and valued by small and medium-sized parks, which represent a large percentage of our park units and which lack sufficient staff to oversee complex issues involving maintenance contracts, partnership fundraising agreements, disciplinary matters, environmental compliance, and similar issues. Central and regional offices perform much of this work and its unavailability will lead to more investigations and oversight hearings by Congress when mistakes are made.

Additionally, there needs to be a way for central and regional offices to be in tune with changing circumstances at parks and programs under their supervision. Requiring a management review at each park or program office on a regular basis, through a sampling of employee feedback that is protected from disclosure, could allow managers to address issues or challenges prior to them becoming unresolvable and could keep managers up to date on those things that are needed to keep employees engaged in their work.

Human Resources Functions: While central offices provide valuable assistance for the areas mentioned above, the reorganization of the Human Resources (HR) programs has been a disaster for the parks and program offices. This has led to long waits to fill open positions because of requirements to obtain approval for position descriptions, to advertise the opening, to obtain a list of eligible candidates, and to complete hiring. Managers routinely find it takes at least six to nine months to fill a position. The recent freeze on hiring by the Trump Administration only exacerbates this problem. Seasonal hiring has also been thrown into chaos with a recent policy by the Office of Personal Management that disallows a seasonal employee from being rehired at more than one park. In a similar manner, disciplining employees has become a never-ending process that stymies managers from addressing problems in a timely manner.

To address these issues, the number of HR specialists needs to be increased in regional offices and in parks with larger staffs. This includes specialists who classify positions, deal with labor and employee relations, handle training and development opportunities, and address equal employment issues. Managers and superintendents cannot easily obtain guidance and advice for these processes as there are too few specialists, and it can appear to employees that their managers simply do not care about these issues. Additionally, the number of solicitors available to review serious discipline cases is insufficient, leading to long waits for final action, which Congress has complained about many times. Human Resources processes need to be revamped

dramatically to address these impediments to maintaining a functioning and effective workforce to lead the parks and programs.

Paperwork: A large boost to the morale of employees could be obtained by the elimination of unnecessary administrative requests. These requests come from a variety of sources that demand extensive staff time to compile the information. Many of the information requests are “urgent” and require employees to drop everything to provide the information in a timely manner. Once the information is gathered and conveyed to the appropriate party, it is often the last time anyone hears about the issue, leaving employees wondering why the information was needed and how it was used. Often there is no feedback.

Congress routinely mandates reporting requirements in both authorization and appropriations bills. Congress clearly has an oversight role of the Park Service as well as all federal agencies, but we urge care in asking for another study or report that will just sit on a shelf. The Office of Management and Budget also is constantly asking for justification of many things on a regular basis from small items in congressional testimony, to Federal Register notices, to reports being transmitted to Congress, and to requiring extensive data for existing programs as it arbitrarily decides a program needs to be reexamined. Often the questions being asked are hard to understand, redundant, and demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the programs or issue being reviewed. Responding to these requests requires an enormous amount of time, again with no obvious purpose or indication how the information will be used, if ever.

We understand that requests to review materials by officials in the Department of the Interior have exploded in the new administration on everything from routine congressional requests to filling open positions. These reviews lead to several questions that require staff time to develop a response. It is understandable that new political appointees wish to get up to speed on pending issues, but inserting themselves into every routine matter results in members of Congress being upset with not getting a response and the public being unable to obtain answers to their concerns. These review requests also demonstrate a lack of trust in the ability of federal employees to do their jobs. Employees in parks and program offices spend way too much time on keeping up with the paperwork associated with these requests and reviews instead of managing the parks and the NPS programs. Some efforts were made to reduce these requirements in the past administration, but clearly more can be done.

Employee Recognition: Efforts need to be made to recognize the value of the service’s employees. Many employees get a small employee performance cash or time-off award during their annual performance reviews. However, those awards have become routine and do not carry much value with the employee nor provide wider recognition in the service for exceptional work. Park Service and departmental service awards, most of which have no monetary component but which spotlight significant achievements, appear to go to those who are the most “politically correct” rather than those who have performed excellent work. The same people receive award after award, while many people retire from the Park Service after a career of excellent work without ever receiving one service award or other recognition of their contributions. This is partially a result of a lack of support from the Human Resources Office, from which there is no consistent notification to supervisors about employees eligible for the awards and no consistent ability to process the awards.

Additionally, the leadership of the Park service has not made employee recognition a consistent priority of their responsibilities. During the Centennial Celebration, the Park Service focused little on the employees of the service and the contributions they have made to our parks and programs. The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks honored past employees with its Centennial History Project, which collected and posted on its website biographies and oral histories of employees who made significant contributions to the service in many ways. This is just one example of highlighting the excellence of service employees, which can be pointed to as a standard to follow for others entering the workforce.

Employee Training: Training within the service is inconsistent, inadequate, and unavailable to many employees. Managers and supervisors cannot count on training funds being available as they are often the first thing cut when appropriations are reduced. Central office training funds also are separately allocated from the budget available to parks and program offices, making planning difficult.

To the extent training funds are provided, often they are focused on mandatory recertification courses for law enforcement rangers and emergency medical technicians, among other specialists. Additionally, much current training time is spent for annual on-line courses, often mandated by Congress, such as IT security, protection of personally identifiable information, ethics, and a hostile work environment. Employees see these mandatory courses as a waste of time, particularly when they are required each year. On the other hand, employees are left out in the cold when training for the jobs they are performing each day is unavailable.

Part of this can be addressed by having the Park Service invest in live video communications technology so that peers can participate in real time job-related skills training directly at their desks in a "virtual classroom." An example is a workshop in curatorial skills for pottery led by a live trainer at the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training "attended" by curators and curatorial assistants across the country who interact and learn from each other and who are guided by the trainer. Courses such as these can help at a time when travel budgets are tight or non-existent for such on-the-job training courses.

Leadership training also is sorely lacking, with only small steps being made to provide new superintendents and other managers with the basics that they need to do their jobs. This includes leaders being able to set a good example for their employees, to deal fairly with employees, to recognize high-quality performance, to handle disciplinary issues well, and to provide empathy and understanding to employee concerns.

There are many superintendents and program managers who do not have a basic understanding of law, regulation, and policy, which is astonishing considering the responsibilities they are asked to undertake. For example, NPS managers are being strongly encouraged to engage in more philanthropic activities, but often do not have adequate training or guidance. They also have little exposure to case studies to take advantage of lessons learned and to help translate those lessons into practical application in a park or program setting.

The Park Service needs to require its leaders to get the necessary training to meet their responsibilities. The number receiving leadership training now is very small compared to the number in leadership or management positions. Retirees from the service can be a source of assistance to help develop leadership skill sets by mentoring upcoming employees and through their participation in training courses provided by the service.

Travel: Much has been made of federal employee travel over the years and it has become an easy target, often for political purposes. With a workforce scattered among the fifty states and several territories, the inability to travel for training, conference, and development purposes has sent a clear message to employees that no one cares about investing in them and their careers. There are few opportunities to exchange views in person on professional subjects, on best practices, and on common ways to perform the demanding duties required of park employees. Travel budgets for many parks and program offices has been cut by more than half since the 1990s, making it almost unavailable for many employees when inflation is factored in. When the message is relayed from management that it cares little for developing its employees, how can employees be expected to perform at the highest level?

Equal treatment of employees: Unequal treatment of employees is pervasive in the service. As an example, there are couples who both work for the Park Service. Some are hired for jobs in the same park and are able to transfer from one to another together easily. Other couples are not treated as well and find themselves frequently living great distances apart for most of their careers. Additionally, some employees are given the opportunity to work remotely to accommodate a personal need while others are not given this choice when the circumstances are similar. These results are often a matter of who the individuals know, instead of an even application of policy.

There also is inadequate support for employees who undergo personal or professional challenges that affect their performance. Some who run into issues are severely disciplined, while others receive a slap on the wrist. There cases require equitable treatment of all employees.

When it comes to serious misconduct issues involving senior supervisors or superintendents, their treatment should be commensurate with the seriousness of the infraction. Too often in the past the solution has been to reassign the person instead of addressing the misconduct. Many times this has just transferred the problem to another location and the effect on employee morale is devastating while sending a message that managers are not going to be held accountable.

The new Ombuds program holds promise for allowing employees to report problems in parks and program offices. However, it appears unreasonable to expect a couple of people in the Washington Office to ensure all of the problems brought to its attention are addressed. Consideration needs to be given to expanding the resources of this program so that parks in each region can guarantee timely follow-up. We have to remember, though, that the overwhelming majority of the NPS workforce is composed of dedicated, hardworking individuals and we urge caution in convicting employees of misconduct before the facts are investigated and verified.

Along with the Ombuds program, particular attention needs to be paid to supporting new and younger female employees in the service. This can be implemented through a defined process of

communication between female employees and their supervisors that provides a message they will be treated fairly, respectfully, and with empathy. This communication should also include assurances that female employees will be treated equally when it comes to training, detail assignments, and career promotion.

Several of the ideas discussed above can be implemented now through existing processes and programs. Others might require a reallocation of resources with a commitment to following through to ensure their implementation. The vast majority of Park Service employees are dedicated to their jobs and the mission of the service. But inadequate annual appropriations and a lack of support from Congress will signal to them that their work is not important or valued. We urge members of the subcommittee to do all that they can to follow the request from Director Horace Albright in his 1933 retirement letter to the National Park Service where he counseled, “Do not let the service become ‘just another Government bureau;’ keep it youthful, vigorous, clean and strong.”

That completes my statement to the subcommittee. I would be glad to respond to any questions you may have.