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The Coalition To Protect America's National Parks

Voices of Experience

**Statement of Richard G. Ring
Coalition to Protect America's National Parks
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Hearing to Examine Deferred Maintenance and Operational Needs
of the National Park Service**

April 17, 2018

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (Coalition) to examine the deferred maintenance and operational needs of the National Park Service. I am a long-time member of the Coalition, including having served on the Executive Council for the last five years. I retired in 2004 after 35 years of government service, including 33 with the National Park Service (NPS). This work included my service as superintendent of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks, and as associate director, park operations and education, and associate director of administration, business practices, and workforce development. The Coalition is comprised of more than 1,500 members who collectively have more than 35,000 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.

In 2016, during the National Park Service's Centennial year, a record-breaking 324 million people visited the 417 national park sites throughout our nation. The visitation numbers for 2017 were almost as high, which reflects the importance of these natural, cultural, and historic places to the people of our country. Along with the parks, the National Park Service touches the lives of even more of our citizens through a number of grant and technical assistance programs, which assist in the preservation of our nation's natural, cultural, and historic resources in a partnership between the National Park Service and hundreds of individuals and organizations throughout the country.

This work would not be possible without regular, annual appropriations from Congress to support over 23,000 employees and 400,000 volunteers who are dedicated to the enjoyment of these special places by the American public. The Coalition was extremely pleased that Congress rejected the large budget cuts presented by the administration in its FY 18 budget, and instead, produced a bipartisan Department of the Interior Appropriations Act as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which provided \$3.2 billion for NPS, which is \$270 million over the current

FY 2017/Continuing Resolution (CR) levels, and \$648 million over the president's request. This funding level provided NPS with fixed costs, which helps ensure that the funding increases will not be swallowed up by annual recurring costs beyond the control of NPS.

The coalition was particularly pleased to see a boost of \$18 million for historic preservation programs, which will help toward the revitalization of historic neighborhoods and the protection of a number of significant historic structures throughout our nation. Additionally, Congress appropriated an additional \$150 million to the construction account over the FY 2017/CR levels, with the increased money to help address the deferred maintenance backlog. We appreciate the role that the chairman of this committee played in providing this increased funding in her other position as chairman of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, with the support of her colleagues on both sides of the aisle who have been long-time supporters of the national parks.

Much has been written and discussed about the maintenance backlog of the national park service, which is estimated by the National Park Service to be approximately \$11.6 billion in FY 2017. In fact, we sometimes fear that the deferred maintenance backlog is the only issue facing the NPS that gets attention from members of Congress and the public. If we truly want to protect these important natural, historic, and cultural resources under the care of the Park Service, and provide for a worthwhile visitor experience, adequate levels of annual appropriations are needed. It does no good for the visitor experience to reduce funding in other parts of the park and program budget in order to address the maintenance backlog. Funding for both is needed and one cannot be sacrificed at the expense of the other.

Even with the increased appropriations provided in the recent Consolidated Appropriations Act, parks continue to face challenges. For example, among the various park units found in the metropolitan area of Boston, MA, several of them are only open seasonally due to a lack of appropriations and staffing. The John Fitzgerald Kennedy National Historic Site, the Longfellow House-Washington Headquarters National Historic Site, and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site are closed for several months in the winter with the public being unable to visit these areas. Along with the lack of appropriations, the recent crackdown of the Office of Personnel Management on the number of hours worked by seasonal employees has led the parks to be unable to hire the needed seasonal staff for the full period that the site is open and has delayed timely hiring because of the convoluted hiring process that requires sign-off by the Washington office.

And there are a number of grant and technical assistance programs that continue to be shortchanged every time the administration presents a new budget to Congress. NPS continues to have a large backlog in land acquisition. At the end of 2016, this number was \$2.1 billion. These are lands within current park boundaries that have been identified in land protection plans that represent the minimum interest necessary to protect the area and the resources within the park. This administration has adopted a freeze-the-footprint goal, which results in key properties not being acquired. And this continues to go on even though \$900 million a year is being placed in the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) solely for land acquisition purposes.

In a similar manner, a number of historic structures across the country are in danger of being lost because of inadequate appropriations from the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF). As required by

law, \$150 million a year goes into the fund, but appropriations have not kept pace with the need. The increased money Congress provided in FY 2018, is appreciated, but the need is much greater.

Likewise, the NPS relies on partnerships with a number of groups and organizations, including educational institutions to carry out cooperative agreements, technical assistance, and grant programs. Unfortunately, grant programs are constantly the target for reductions or being defunded during the annual budget request sent to Congress, which contributes to uncertainty among many long-standing partners.

But funding alone is not the only challenge the NPS these programs are facing. These partnerships are now being threatened by a new process established within the Department of the Interior that creates an unnecessary and unwise layer of political screening of all grants and cooperative agreements. It appears that the goal of imposing these new review requirements is not intended to ensure the wise use of our federal dollars, but rather as a way of imposing a political litmus test on those applying for federal grants or those entering into a cooperative agreement with the federal government. The impact of these new requirements remains in question but we are worried that they will contribute toward a decline in the effectiveness of the operation of these programs within the Park Service.

Further, we were dismayed to hear recently that the department is engaging in censorship of scientific documents to remove any mention of humans' role in climate change, despite the secretary denying before this committee recently that there was censorship taking place. It is no secret that this administration is in denial about the impact of climate change and seems to want to put its head in the sand on ways to address this issue. For the Park Service; however, the issue is very real as there are 118 units of the park system that are along the coasts of this country and for which the impact of climate change remains at the forefront. If NPS is forced to delay or ignore its potential impact, our country stands to lose a number of important natural, cultural, and historic resources along the way.

We urge the committee not to lose sight of these issues while making an effort to address the deferred maintenance backlog as they all contribute toward the health of our parks, the visitor experience that is provided, and the way the NPS interacts with the communities it works in every day.

Additionally, the coalition believes it is important to recognize the efforts NPS has made over the past several years to bring more resources to our parks and the deferred maintenance backlog. For example, the NPS undertook the Call to Action, carrying out hundreds of projects and programs to engage youth, invest in the visitor experience, increase volunteerism, support local communities, and preserve natural and cultural resources. Several projects and programs used non-federal resources to accomplish park objectives, thus saving taxpayer dollars.

NPS also launched the Find Your Park campaign for its Centennial, which led to increased visitation and increased fee revenue, concession sales, and gift shop purchases. Additionally, the National Park Foundation undertook a capital campaign, raising over \$500 million to benefit the parks.

The Park Service also matched each of the amounts Congress provided as Centennial Challenge funding over the past several years and permanently enshrined this matching program through the Challenge Fund established as part of the National Park Service Centennial Act. Finally, NPS brought greater order to its fee program by standardizing the tiers of fees across the parks so that similar-sized parks charged similar fees. This revenue, along with private money generated through the Challenge Fund, is focused on addressing the deferred maintenance backlog, along with facilities that provide visitor services, and trail maintenance. We believe the fee program existing within NPS is a much more reasonable for ensuring parks are accessible to all people instead of the large fee increases proposed by the administration at a number of our largest parks. We are pleased this idea has been abandoned after the large public outcry with more modest increases in its place.

While the increased appropriations for construction in the FY 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act will help make a dent in the deferred maintenance backlog, funding remains inadequate to reduce the backlog in a meaningful way. With a backlog of \$11.6 billion, more needs to be done. Half of this backlog is the result of thousands of miles of roads, bridges, and other supporting structures that are in dire need of repair. The Arlington Memorial Bridge is just one example of this backlog.

And it is this large group of assets, with many being decades old, which has contributed to the rising maintenance backlog. With more visitors coming to the parks, this only puts additional stress on the structures found in the parks.

Unfortunately, the Park Service continues to add to the backlog of maintenance as there is inadequate funding available to address it. Superintendents of parks are often faced with bad choices as fixing park buildings and other assets will mean nothing if they do not have the annual funding that is needed to maintain the structures. Over the last several years, annual maintenance funds have not kept up, resulting in further backsliding in addressing the backlog. There are projects ready to go all across the country. The only thing lacking is funding. Completing these projects with an infusion of funding could make an immediate and tangible difference in the parks.

The National Park Service had previously estimated in its FY 2017 budget that \$400 million a year was needed to restore and maintain in good condition all of its highest-priority non-transportation assets within ten years. Because it is unlikely that annual appropriations will increase by this much, the National Park Service needs a dedicated source of funding to address the backlog. Similar to the structure of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Historic Preservation Fund, the coalition believes a dedicated source of revenue for a maintenance backlog fund is required. There will be no reduction in the backlog if the revenue is unreliable from year to year. And this revenue must be in addition to current annual appropriations and not supplant annual funding.

Various proposals are now pending in the Senate and House and this appears to be an issue that members of both parties can get behind to find a solution. We are concerned about some of the pending proposals, including one being promoted by the administration, which seem to rely on

opening up as many public lands as possible to oil and gas drilling in order to generate revenues to go toward a maintenance backlog fund. This appears to be a myopic view by this administration toward nearly every issue that comes up. We rarely, if ever, hear of the importance of preserving the natural, cultural, and historic resources of the national parks. On the contrary, developing energy, regardless of the impact on the existing public lands seems to be the only priority.

We understand the committee will be looking at specific bills to address the maintenance backlog at a later date. We will be glad to continue to work with you during this process in order to help ensure a dedicated source of revenue to move the Park Service ahead in addressing the backlog.

That concludes my statement. I would be glad to respond to any questions you might have.