

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN RON WYDEN
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
NATIONAL PARK FUNDING
JULY 25, 2013

In 2016, just three years from now, the National Park Service will celebrate its centennial anniversary. And while the creation of our national park system is one of our country's greatest successes, the Park Service faces significant funding challenges in taking care of the more than 400 national parks, monuments, and other sites that Congress and the President have entrusted to its protection. It has a deferred maintenance backlog that is estimated at \$11 billion, maybe even higher. And the backlog grows larger every year.

Meanwhile, the Park Service, like every other part of the Federal government, faces significant limitations on the funding Congress appropriates for the operation and care of our national parks, and it is very unlikely that appropriation levels will increase anytime soon. Certainly not increase to the amount necessary to fully address the deferred maintenance backlog. So given these challenges, Senator Murkowski and I wanted to schedule this hearing so that the Committee can explore and consider new ideas to help fund the National Park Service for the next century.

It really wouldn't be an appropriate parks hearing if you didn't refer at least once to Wallace Stegner's famous quote that "national parks are the best idea we ever had." And they certainly continue to be a very popular idea. Despite the budgetary challenges, senators of both political parties continue to push for new national parks in their home States. Already this Congress, 7 bills calling for studies of new national parks have been referred to this Committee, another 7 bills would establish new national parks, and 6 bills would expand the size of existing park areas. These bills are evidence of the extraordinary popularity of national parks with the American people and the desire

to protect new areas and tell new stories that are not adequately represented in the national park system. I support many of those efforts – in fact one of the bills expanding an existing national park area is legislation that I proposed to expand Oregon Caves National Monument.

So I understand the desire and the need to protect these special places. At the same time, my view is Congress has to come up with fresh creative ideas to help the Park Service make concrete tangible headway with its maintenance backlog to ensure the long-term viability of the national park system.

For example today I'm going to want to explore with witnesses the idea of raising fees for non-U.S. citizens like many other countries do. For example this could apply to backcountry camping permits, which are very popular. Of course the argument on behalf of looking at an idea like this is those are individuals who use our park system, they don't pay taxes to support our parks and there is a very high volume, an increasing volume, of foreign visitors.

Senator Murkowski and I are especially interested in having Dr. Coburn today. He has been persistent in advocating for the need to address the deferred maintenance funding backlog for some time. As Dr. Coburn does on so many issues, he makes it clear that you cannot just pretend that problems don't exist. You've got to step up and you've got to look as I indicated at real and creative approaches that you can build bipartisan support for to address these concerns. He raises real and legitimate concerns about how the Park Service will be able to properly care for our national parks and how it will ever be able to address the funding backlog. So Senator Murkowski and I thought it was especially appropriate that he lead off the hearing this morning, so that we can get his perspective and consider the issues that he raised and we thank him and we will hear from him in just a few minutes.

Last point I wanted to make was that as the park service centennial gets closer we are going to consider all of the creative ideas that have been proposed thus far. Certainly there ought to be opportunities for national park partners such as park philanthropic and friends groups. I would just ask that colleagues on both sides of the aisle who support parks be open to considering some of these new approaches. For example our Committee recently included \$50 million in dedicated funding in the Helium bill to pay for the Federal share of challenge cost-share agreements for national park deferred maintenance projects. In effect through the Helium legislation Senator Murkowski and I said here's a chance to meet one of the country's economic needs and in the years ahead, on a specific timetable, really get the country out of the helium business. And we're able to do that in a bipartisan way.

We'll pay special attention to some of the funding ideas proposed by the Bipartisan Policy Center, which began an effort to reach across the aisle in a challenging area and we're going to be asking for some details about that.

While the Park Service is primarily reliant on Federal appropriations to fund deferred maintenance projects, the agency is able to use revenue collected from park entrance and visitor use fees to fund repair, maintenance and other projects that directly improve the enjoyment of our visitors. However, the authority to collect and spend fee revenues expires in December, 2014, and if the law isn't renewed, the Park Service will lose almost \$180 million annually. So I think it's critical that pass fee legislation be passed during this Congress so that the Park Service and other land management agencies do not lose that particularly important revenue source.

We're also looking forward to the views of National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis. He's been talking with us about a number of different approaches.

Let me now recognize Senator Murkowski on this matter and particularly thank her again for all of the bipartisan efforts that she has been willing to take on and that's one of the reasons we've been able to get 14 bills cleared in this congress and that's more than anyone anticipated at this early date.