

**STATEMENT OF SHAWN BENGE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE  
THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
NATIONAL PARKS, REGARDING THE STATE OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.**

**MAY 26, 2021**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of the National Park System, including the impacts of COVID-19 on operations, staff, visitation, and facilities.

As the Deputy Director of Operations for the National Park Service (NPS), it is a privilege to represent the approximately 20,000 dedicated employees of our workforce. One of the most rewarding parts of my job is reading the letters and emails that I receive from Americans who have visited national parks and want to share the life-changing and inspirational experiences they had during their trips. More often than not, these thoughtful messages single out individual NPS employees who went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that visitors feel welcome and have the best park experience possible.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on Park Operations**

During the last year, we have been reminded of the importance of public lands to the American people, who sought out open spaces where they could safely recreate. The NPS welcomed the public while working to mitigate COVID-19 exposure risks for visitors and staff alike.

As it did for people around the world, COVID-19 brought challenges to the NPS. In the early weeks of the pandemic, many parks closed their visitor centers and other indoor spaces, but retained some level of outdoor visitor access. The NPS Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan, released in May 2020, guided park operational decision making during this time, with the agency's primary posture to provide visitor access, particularly to outdoor spaces.

While a significant number of NPS employees have been on maximum telework during the pandemic, law enforcement, custodial services, visitor services, research, restoration work, fee collection, and other operational work continues in the field. The employees of the NPS have shown remarkable ingenuity and flexibility in finding ways to protect resources and serve visitors during this public health crisis, while also working to mitigate their own risk of exposure. Some of the new interpretive tools developed, including virtual tours of historic buildings and online interactive educational programming, will enhance the visitor experience for years to come. The NPS also utilized the hiring flexibilities authorized by OPM, which have allowed the NPS to bring on over 700 employees into positions that otherwise would likely have remained unfilled during the pandemic.

The NPS was proud to take a leadership role in the Department of the Interior's pandemic response through its close partnership with the US Public Health Service (USPHS). Among its many roles, USPHS provide high quality scientific advice on a range of new and evolving public health issues to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of visitors and employees. This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agreement signed between the USPHS and Stephen

Mather, the first NPS Director. We are grateful for this unique and important partnership, in which public health officers are assigned from the Department of Health and Human Services to serve our agency directly to promote, protect, and advance the health of our visiting public and employees. This partnership has been invaluable during the past 14 months.

In January, President Biden signed Executive Order 13991 to prioritize halting the spread of COVID-19 by relying on the best available data and science-based health measures. A NPS COVID Response Task Force, including representatives from relevant NPS programs as well as the USPHS, has been charged with developing policies consistent with new and evolving guidance. Though parks are increasingly open this spring, some operations will continue to be impacted by limited staffing resulting from public health mitigations, such as reduced occupancy of shared seasonal employee housing. Other sites will continue to limit specific activities, such as tours of historic structures, in order to facilitate physical distancing.

We expect that there will be significant increases in visitation at many units as COVID mitigation measures are reduced, vaccination rates rise, and Americans increase their travel. Many campgrounds and lodgings at busy parks are already completely booked for the summer, and some parks have instituted new reservation policies to facilitate physical distancing in popular areas. The NPS is encouraging the public to make plans in advance for their visit rather than showing up spontaneously. Through the #PlanLikeARanger campaign, we will launch tomorrow, the NPS is encouraging the public to make plans in advance, be prepared, and recreate responsibly.

Visitors now have a brand-new tool to assist them in their trip planning: the NPS Mobile App, released during National Park Week in April 2021. The development and ongoing maintenance of this app, which provides trip planning information for every National Park System unit, was supported by an appropriation of \$1 million. Linked to the NPS website, it ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. The app is built to be used even in remote parks where internet access may be limited, by allowing items to be downloaded to a visitor's phone in advance.

### **COVID-19 Impacts to the NPS Budget**

From a budget perspective, COVID-19 resulted in unexpected costs to NPS operations throughout the system, and we appreciate Congress's recognition of these impacts by making funding available through the CARES Act. The NPS has incurred \$16.8 million in COVID-related expenses to date principally related to supplemental staffing, additional housing to facilitate physical distancing, extra cleaning and hygiene supplies, personal protective equipment, expanded telework capabilities, and virtual visitor experiences.

Reduced visitation and the temporary suspension of entrance fees to national parks beginning March 18, 2020, negatively impacted fee revenues in FY 2020 as compared to the previous year: recreation fee revenue was down 19%, and concession franchise revenue was reduced by nearly half, a combined loss of approximately \$125 million. On the other hand, some cost categories showed savings in FY 2020: NPS travel costs decreased by \$16 million, and utility costs dropped by \$5 million.

### **COVID-19 Impacts to Concessions and Other Park Partners**

In its mission to serve the public, the NPS collaborates with commercial and non-profit partners in a variety of relationships. Concessioners operate many visitor services in parks, including lodging, food services, gas stations, retail, marinas, equipment rentals, and more. Many of our concessioners have had reduced operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to trends in the broader hospitality and recreation industry. Impacts varied by location and type of service. For example, most marina and boat rental operations performed on par or better than 2019 levels. Conversely, at the Statue of Liberty, ferry services and food and beverage operations dropped by about 85%, and mountain climbing services on Denali were cancelled for the year. The NPS has worked with concessioners to provide relief where possible within the legal framework of concessions contracts, including offering to extend the term (i.e., duration) of eligible contracts and allowing for delayed payment of franchise fees.

The NPS also issues Commercial Use Authorizations (CUAs) for businesses that bring visitors into parks, from large multi-state tour operators to small family-owned guide services. CUAs are typically issued in one- or two-year increments park by park, so operators must apply for CUAs for each park in which they operate. The NPS has worked collaboratively with these companies to allow continued operations where feasible and took action to provide administrative relief for 2020 seasons by waiving new application fees for those business that were not allowed to operate during the entire 2020 season.

Over the last year, the NPS engaged in listening sessions with industry representatives, including members of the National Park Hospitality Association, America Outdoors Association, American Mountain Guides Association, and various bus and tour associations, to share and gather information. The NPS will continue this dialogue throughout this upcoming season to help us jointly plan for the 2021 season as public health recommendations evolve.

The NPS also has close relationships with non-profit partners that operate facilities and programs within parks such as bookstores and educational services. Philanthropic donations derived from the proceeds of such operations are a significant and critical source of funding to parks. Based on a recent survey by the Public Lands Alliance, cooperating associations representing 84% of park units have collectively lost about \$125 million in gross retail sales since March 2020. As of early May 2021, 33% of association retail stores remain closed and have no plans to reopen in the immediate future, and 44% of association staff have been laid off or had their hours reduced, despite participation in the Paycheck Protection Program.

While we anticipate significant domestic travel in the year to come, we understand that there will continue to be limitations on international travel, which will impact park visitation to many NPS units. Similarly, for parks whose visitors arrive by cruise ship or through tour companies that plan excursions up to a year in advance, visitation may still be impacted in 2021.

### **COVID-19 and the Economic Impact of Parks**

The “2020 Visitor Spending Effects Report” is anticipated to be published in June and will include data on jobs and economic spending relating to parks. It will show that NPS recreation visits dropped to a 40-year low, with a decrease of over 90 million recreation visits from 2019 – roughly a 27.6% drop in visitation. About 70% of that drop occurred April through July.

Despite these service-wide decreases, a third of our parks had at least one month of record visitation in 2020, as people sought the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors. Our urban parks, such as those in the Washington, D.C. area, experienced particularly high visitation.

### **Looking Forward: Investing in our Future**

The NPS celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016 and is now focusing on investing in the future of our national parks and conservation programs for its second century.

The increased awareness around social equity and racial justice issues in 2020 helped to underscore the urgency of modernizing our law enforcement programs and meeting the expectations of the public we serve. Public trust and legitimacy are our top priorities, along with ensuring our officers are trained and equipped for the difficult work they do. Two recent efforts, which began before 2020, reflect these priorities.

Recently, the NPS recruited a class of law enforcement rangers that will start their careers at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, rather than having to pay for their own initial training prior to being hired. This removes a barrier to access for potential candidates. This innovative program was marketed widely to create a large and diverse applicant pool. Over 2,000 applications were received for the class of 24 participants. We expect programs such as this will help us to continue to recruit, hire, train, and retain a professional law enforcement workforce that reflects the diversity of America.

In order to enhance public transparency in law enforcement for community contacts, provide objective evidence, and document officers' actions while performing their duties, the NPS has worked to develop a robust body-worn camera (BWC) program for its officers. As of March 2021, the NPS has over 1,000 BWCs in use at park units. The United States Park Police (USPP) have not used BWCs previously but began implementing the program in the San Francisco Field Office on May 23, 2021. There will be a total of 41 USPP officers trained on camera usage in this first phase. NPS intends to issue guidance to the field that would require all uniformed law enforcement officers to utilize BWCs and a Digital Evidence Management System by the end of 2021.

The NPS is also modernizing its infrastructure. When Americans visit their parks, they expect to find high quality facilities. Many of the roads, trails, restrooms, water treatment systems, and visitor facilities in national parks are aging and strained by a level of use they were not designed to support. We are grateful to Congress for its recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which presents an extraordinary opportunity for crucial investments in the infrastructure needed for people to have safe and memorable experiences when they visit parks. Under the provisions of GAOA, the NPS receives 70% of the Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) — up to \$1.33 billion each year, or up to \$6.65 billion total, through 2025.

We are focused on making strategic investments across all of our funding streams to leverage opportunities that can help satisfy the ongoing need for operations and maintenance funding and maximize the benefit to the American public.

Infrastructure needs vary significantly by park, and most of the NPS's deferred maintenance (DM) is concentrated in a few dozen parks. In the fall of 2020, the NPS stood up the process to select and plan the initial Fiscal Year 2021 projects. These 51 priority projects span 37 parks and represent \$1.3 billion in investment, covering a range of categories including buildings and structures; recreational assets; water and utilities; transportation systems; and demolition. As project execution begins for FY 2021, NPS is simultaneously formulating priorities for FY 2022-FY 2025.

The much-needed funding infusion from GAOA will help us make meaningful progress in improving the condition of high priority assets, particularly by allowing us to address some of the largest and most expensive infrastructure projects. The LRF program is focused on reducing DM over the next five years, yet there remains an ongoing need for long-term maintenance, modernization, renewal, and operations support. We will continue to seek funding through line item construction, Federal Highways, and other programs, to ensure facilities, including roads, trails, and natural and cultural resources, are properly maintained and improved to meet code compliance for safety, sustainability, and accessibility for people with disabilities, and to meet current and future capacity needs.

GAOA also provided full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million a year. LWCF is vital to expanding recreational opportunities for all Americans, especially in communities where recreational opportunities may be limited. The LWCF-funded Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership grant program recently distributed \$150 million to local communities, enabling urban communities to create new outdoor recreation spaces, reinvigorate existing parks, and form connections between people and the outdoors in economically underserved communities. LWCF funding may also help further the Administration's goal to conserve 30 percent of the land and water within the United States by 2030 as envisioned in the President's America the Beautiful initiative.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, the last 14 months have brought unprecedented challenges to our nation and to our national parks, but they have also shone a spotlight on the importance of parks – as spaces for physical and mental health, as well as places to reflect on who we are as Americans, and who we want to be. We appreciate your ongoing support as we continue to evolve both the National Park System and the National Park Service to preserve these special places in so they will continue to be enjoyed by this and future generations.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for inviting me to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.