

**Full Committee Hearing: Alternative Funding for National Park Service Maintenance
Backlog
Senator Lisa Murkowski – Opening Statement
July 25, 2013**

Thank you, Chairman Wyden, for calling this very important hearing today. I would also like to thank our colleague, Dr. Coburn, for his interest in this matter and your interest in ensuring that we're on a path toward greater sustainable when it comes to the operation of our National Park System.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that we are taking a very important step with today's hearing in starting this discussion about how we will begin to pay down the National Park Service's maintenance backlog, which the Park Service estimates at approximately \$13 billion. Now, I want to be clear right away, I do not think that this is an issue that should be solved through additional federal funding. As everyone knows, our nation is facing a very serious fiscal situation, so we must be looking at new and alternative ways to find funding for the Park System, and also to reassess our current funding priorities.

One of those area that I think we need to be looking at is what is happening within the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the very significant increases we're seeing there. Coming from a State where the Federal Government already owns nearly 70% of the land, I always approach requests to purchase additional federal land with skepticism, but during these dire economic times, I cannot imagine why purchasing more land is such a priority. It strikes me as counterintuitive to be adding more lands to the maintenance list when the lands the government already is dealing with such obstacles when it comes to the maintenance of the existing park lands. This is also an area where I see the potential for an agreement that would update this statute, making it more relevant to our current reality, both from a public lands policy and budgetary standpoint. I would like to work with the Chairman, Dr. Coburn, and Director Jarvis on reforming the LWCF so that this can be a tool that the NPS (and the other land management agencies) can use to fund deferred maintenance before we buy additional lands to add to the federal burden. Now, I understand that there are certainly time sensitive acquisitions that need to be made on occasion, and I would want to be sure we include those. However, as a general matter, I believe that there is room here for compromise and I very much look forward to discussion on that topic this morning.

The next area I would like to discuss today is the potential for increased funding and involvement from outside organizations and friends groups. One of the major complaints that I hear from friends groups are the bureaucratic obstacles that many of these groups face when trying to donate to the National Park Service for specific projects. We need to streamline this process and encourage folks to contribute both their resources and dollars. I have a press release from Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve here from July 19th announcing a clean-up event on August 3rd, in Chitina, Alaska, that calls for public volunteers to pick up trash and debris along the Copper River. What a great event! These are exactly the kind of volunteer effort that the NPS should be using, and expanding upon, to save money and to bring locals into their Parks for a positive experience.

I also hear from private CEO's who want to donate funds to the National Park Service and specific Parks, but feel that the donations are not adequately recognized. I hope to hear from Director Jarvis on how we can work together to improve the donation process and recognition procedures. An idea that I would like to put forward is for donor recognition throughout the National Park System. For example, we should have tasteful recognition of private donors who are willing to pay for specific maintenance backlog projects, perhaps the naming of a room in a visitors center or the naming of a bench. There are dollars here to be brought into the Park System; we just need to make it easy and worthwhile for these donors.

Another area that I think that we should explore is the current Recreational Fee structure. Some National Parks charge entrance fees, and others do not. We need to make this Fee plan equitable across the National Park System. I find it unfair that my constituents in Alaska have to pay to visit some of their Parks but other folks around the country do not bear the same burden. For the Parks that do not charge an entrance fee, perhaps we could look at the idea of charging for parking within those parks. I am told by the Park Service that if the NPS started charging for parking on the National Mall, for example, they could raise an additional \$2 million per year. We could put that money right back into maintenance on the Mall.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for scheduling this hearing and being willing to work on these very important issues.