

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING S. 2742, TO ESTABLISH FORT ONTARIO NATIONAL MONUMENT IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK AS A UNIT OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

May 15, 2024

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 2742, to establish the Fort Ontario National Monument in the State of New York as a unit of the National Park System, and for other purposes.

The Department recommends that the Committee defer action on S. 2742 until after the special resource study on Fort Ontario has been completed. This study was authorized by Congress in 2018 (P.L. 115-255) and is currently underway.

S. 2742 would authorize the establishment of the Fort Ontario National Monument as a unit of the National Park System to preserve, protect, and interpret the history of the site, including the history related to the Indigenous peoples who inhabited the area, previous fortifications dating to the French and Indian War, and the housing of refugees during World War II. The bill provides for the unit to be established after the Secretary of the Interior determines that sufficient land or interests in land has been acquired to constitute a manageable park unit. The Secretary, in consultation with the State and the city of Oswego, New York, would determine the boundary of the park and prepare a map within 30 days of establishing the Monument. The bill contains additional provisions that are standard for legislation establishing new park units.

The first Fort Ontario, located on the east side of the Oswego River on high ground overlooking Lake Ontario, was erected by the British in 1755 to bolster defenses along the Great Lakes. The original fort was destroyed during the French and Indian War, and two forts were subsequently built at the site—one during the American Revolutionary War and the other during the War of 1812. The third and current stone star fort was constructed during the 1840s to help guard against hostilities along the border shared by the United States and the British North American Colonies (present-day Canada) and was occupied by the U.S. Army through World War II.

During World War II, Fort Ontario hosted the only emergency shelter for European war refugees on American soil, housing almost 1,000 European war refugees, the majority of whom were European Jews. Also, at the start of World War II, the all-African American regiment known as the "Harlem Hellfighters," the 369th Antiaircraft Artillery Division, trained there.

After the end of the war, many of the fort's buildings were demolished by the US Army before transferring the military reserve to the state of New York. The fort opened to the public as Fort Ontario State Historic Site in 1949. The state historic site encompasses the 19th century star-

shaped fort, historic structures and cemetery, and views of Lake Ontario. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. Remaining structures of the refugee camp, including the Safe Haven Holocaust Refugee Shelter Museum located in the historic guard house, are located on lands now owned by the city of Oswego within the historic footprint of the 20th century military reserve.

If the Committee decides to move forward with S. 2742 in its current form, we recommend amending the bill to establish the boundaries of the unit before, rather than after, enactment of the bill. We would be happy to provide the committee with a legislative map and recommended language for that purpose.

Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.