

Statement of Raymond David Vela
Nominee for the Position of Director, National Park Service,
Department of the Interior
Before the Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
United States Senate
November 15, 2018

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished members of the Committee, I am deeply humbled and honored to be before you today as President Trump's nominee to serve as the 19th Director of the National Park Service.

I want to thank Secretary Zinke for his confidence and support in me for this position. In addition, I greatly value and appreciate the introduction from the distinguished Senator from Texas, Senator John Cornyn.

As the oldest grandchild of a sharecropper, my journey through the National Park Service began on a trip to Yellowstone National Park while a young teenager from our rural home in Wharton, Texas. My parents decided one day to take a trip with my younger brother Michael, sister Judy and I, and it proved to be a journey of a lifetime.

My dad Raymond who is a proud Navy veteran, and my mother Mercedes, raised their three children with a strong foundation and appreciation of faith, family, and country. On that first ever trip to Yellowstone, we stopped at Grand Teton National Park. Our eyes could not fully absorb all that we were seeing - iconic landscapes, wildlife, and the first ever sighting of a National Park Ranger.

The image of that National Park Ranger truly caught my eye, and I began to think about how special it must be to work in a national park. Upon arriving home from Yellowstone, I devoured every article that our assistant high school librarian, Mrs. Betty Bergstrom, could find.

After graduating from Texas A&M University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Recreation and Parks, my journey as a permanent employee of the National Park Service was finally realized when I became a permanent employee at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.

Accompanying me through this entire journey is my kindergarten classmate, high school sweetheart, and bride of over 38 years, Melissa. I am truly blessed that Melissa said "yes" and supported our many moves across this great country. We raised two children in the national parks, Christina and Anthony, who like their parents, are also graduates of Texas A&M University.

We are so very proud of our children as Christina works in the field of education while Anthony serves as a Chief Ranger in one of our park units in Florida. Anthony met his wife Amelia while they were working in Grand Teton National Park, and Amelia is also a National Park Service employee.

Melissa and I are also blessed to have six grandchildren ranging in ages from eleven years to nine months. We are also pleased to have members of our family, friends, and colleagues who are with us here today.

Over the course of nearly 29 years in the National Park Service, I have held nearly every leadership position in the agency. From serving as a front line ranger, supervisory park ranger, superintendent at four different park units, regional director of 66 units in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean to associate director in headquarters. Today, I serve as a Superintendent of the very national park that changed my life.

As a result of these experiences, I have had the honor of working with a very passionate and dedicated workforce - the pride of the National Park Service. I am so very proud of our permanent, seasonal, and volunteer workforce. Yet, we as an agency have fallen short in treating them with the dignity and respect that they truly deserve.

The scourge of sexual and workplace harassment in society and in the National Park Service must stop! Great strides have been made within the agency, but there's more to be done. If confirmed, I will continue to hold people and processes accountable to ensure that we achieve our workplace and workforce interests.

Since his confirmation, Secretary Zinke has been discussing and tackling the Department's deferred maintenance backlog, as it has been one of his top priorities. The National Park Service has the largest share at \$11.6 billion dollars.

I applaud the Administration and the Congress in pursuing a funding and mitigation strategy designed to address the network of roads, restrooms, water treatment systems, housing, and visitor centers that are aging and exceeding capacity. Many of these aging facilities have a direct impact on the visitor experience. Should this bill pass, and should I be confirmed, I look forward to rebuilding our national treasures so they remain the envy of the world.

As we embark upon a second century of service, we must make ourselves relevant to current and future generations while building a diverse population of conservation stewards and workforce. From tackling the effects of climate change to addressing the visitor experience, future generations will be impacted by the decisions and actions that we make today. With this in mind, I would like to acknowledge the students and faculty of Wharton County Junior College and Texas A&M University who are watching this hearing today.

As the first Latino in the over 102 year history of the National Park Service to be nominated Director, I am reminded of the lessons taught to me by a sharecropper – be humble, maintain a strong moral and ethical compass, and pursue causes greater than myself.

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished members of the Committee, if confirmed, I eagerly look forward to working with you in protecting what has been called "America's Best Idea" - our nation's national parks. It is my pleasure to answer any questions that you may have.