

**Statement of John Garder,
Director, Budget and Appropriations, National Parks Conservation Association
Before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
April 11, 2014**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of NPCA. Since 1919, NPCA has been the leading independent voice in support of enhancing, protecting and promoting America's National Park System for people from all walks of life to learn from and enjoy – now and into the future. On behalf of our 800,000 members and supporters from every state in the Union, I appreciate the opportunity to provide our views regarding the Park Service budget for the upcoming fiscal year. NPCA requests for Fiscal Year 2015 appropriated funding for the National Park Service of \$2,623,646,000, which is equal to the president's appropriated request but rejecting his request to reduce National Heritage Area Funding by \$9,087,000. This includes NPCA's priorities this year of meeting—at a minimum—the president's request for a \$47 million increase in park operations, and \$10 million in appropriated funds for the Centennial Challenge.

Let me say at the outset, Mr. Chairman, that we are very pleased to welcome you in your new capacity as Chairman of this important subcommittee. We trust our longstanding, excellent working relationship with the Subcommittee and its outstanding professional staff will continue under your leadership, and we look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead. We fully appreciate the tremendous challenge you face in setting reasonable, responsible spending priorities for the varied federal agencies and programs under your subcommittee's jurisdiction when the goal of substantially reducing the level of federal spending has driven so much of the political discourse and agenda. We share the hope that the budget and appropriations cycle now underway for Fiscal Year 2015 might signal a return to a more orderly and reasonable process, particularly with the landmark centennial of the National Park System fast approaching.

Providing adequate funding is more than simply another expenditure; it is an investment in our nation's future with tangible returns that are particularly significant now as we continue to recover from a long economic downturn. The government shutdown demonstrated the economic importance of national parks to gateway communities. According to the Interior Department, these communities lost \$414 million in visitor spending alone during the 16-day shutdown. Investments in the park service budget support robust economic activity:

- Every dollar invested in the National Park Service yields ten dollars in economic activity;
- National parks support nearly \$27 billion in economic activity annually and nearly a quarter million private sector jobs;
- Of the 25 most popular travel destinations in the United States, eight are units of the National Park System.

I know I don't have to tell you—as a longstanding member of the subcommittee—that the budget situation for the National Park Service for the past several years has been like a roller coaster ride, headed mostly down. Over recent months and years, the Park Service and the national treasures entrusted to their care have been damaged by compounded budget cuts. So has the experience and enjoyment of the people who visit them. The October 2013 16-day government shutdown came on top of an ongoing pattern of declining budgets followed by the damaging and indiscriminate across-the-board cuts mandated by the sequester. The budget to operate the national parks has been cut by nearly eight percent in today's dollars compared to four years ago. That is on top of many years of chronic underfunding for park operations that have resulted in operations shortfalls ranging from estimates of from \$500 million to as much as \$800 million annually. Over the past decade, the National Park Service construction budget has been cut by over \$272 million, or 66% in today's dollars. This has compounded the years of underfunding, resulting in today's nearly \$12 billion backlog. That underfunding is due to actions and inactions over many congresses, and by both political parties.

The maintenance backlog is attributable to chronic funding deficiencies in several categories, including operations, transportation and construction. These deficiencies have forced park managers to make choices between what needs to be done and what absolutely must be done immediately to keep facilities up and running and visitors safe. The longer needed repairs and maintenance to facilities are put off, the more expensive and difficult they become.

The result of this long-term budget roller coaster, particularly during the sequester but not limited to it, has been:

- parks and park facilities opening later and closing earlier or more frequently;
- Fewer park rangers and other staff protecting and maintaining parks;
- visitor centers operating with fewer rangers or closing altogether for lack of staff;
- compromised science and resource protection and decreased cyclical maintenance;
- fewer backcountry patrols to ensure visitor safety and prevent poaching and looting
- other impacts that compromise resources and public enjoyment and safety.

To be sure, park managers have done the best they can to weather the many rounds of budget reductions. There has been some level of savings through employee attrition, but superintendents will tell you that while operating a park with insufficient staff can be managed in the short term, it simply can't be sustained over the long run. At some point the consequences become evident, compromising the parks' ability to protect resources from damages, keep visitors safe and provide adequate visitor services. Director Jarvis recently testified before this subcommittee that the proposed FY15 investment in park operations would return some seasonal rangers to our parks, but pointed out that under the proposal only half of those lost seasonal rangers would return. Clearly, more work is needed to bring our national parks and the men and women who steward them back to where they once were.

The real question for Fiscal Year 2015 is whether progress will occur in getting the National Park System in the shape it should to begin its next century in a manner consistent with the pride Americans feel for our heritage and our national treasures. FY 2015 is an opportunity for Congress to help answer that question, since it is a critical year to begin preparing for 2016. In light of that, the administration has proposed a multi-year centennial initiative that builds on the one proposed by the Bush administration. Recognizing the magnitude of the challenge posed by the backlog, the administration proposes that legislation be enacted to begin reducing the backlog on a mandatory basis. They also propose to renew the Centennial Challenge—a program familiar to this subcommittee from the Bush/Kempthorne era—in an amount identical to that proposed by the Bush administration. This subcommittee can play a significant role in promoting such an initiative and in educating others about why it is necessary, and we stand ready to help in that effort. A Centennial Initiative that attacks the backlog would produce needed construction jobs while restoring America's treasures. And the Centennial Challenge can help the national parks capitalize on the attention the centennial will bring to attract donations from private and other non-federal sources. The fact that Presidents Bush and Obama both have supported renewing our parks in connection with the centennial provides further evidence of the nonpartisan appeal of the parks, and we hope that Congress will seize upon its role in formulating a legacy that will last for the next century.

As a down-payment on enactment of Centennial Challenge legislation, we ask that the subcommittee appropriate at least as much as the administration request—\$10 million—if not more. This subcommittee has noted the importance of matching funds and has drafted report language to that effect. The Centennial Challenge program would leverage important dollars to support signature projects at parks throughout the country. It's a wise investment.

As for park operations, we have consistently noted to this subcommittee NPCA's view that this account should be prioritized. The proposed operations increase would provide funding to enhance the visitor experience, better connect young people with their natural and cultural heritage, and put more rangers to work addressing overdue maintenance needs. We recognize as Director Jarvis did that the proposed increase is insufficient to return ranger levels to where they should be, but it is a welcome step in the right direction. There is a direct connection between those popular rangers, the enjoyment of visitors, and correspondingly the economies of surrounding communities that depend on those visitors having a safe and inspiring experience.

We also support the administration's request of \$192.2 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a critical tool for protecting our national parks. Since it was first enacted, with a dedicated stream of revenue in place from offshore oil and gas leasing in federal waters, the LWCF has realized its full \$900 million envisioned level only once in 49 years. Park Service LWCF funding has declined from \$126 million in FY 2010 to less than \$100 million in FY 2014, a decline of more than 20%. We believe in the healthy, rewarding recreational opportunities that LWCF was intended to provide. The completion of existing national park units by purchasing inholdings from willing sellers will often make park administration and

resource management more efficient and cost effective, thereby freeing up money for to other needs.

We also respect the constraints that both the PILT program and wildfire suppression needs have caused for this subcommittee's allocation, and hope they can be dealt with so that there are more dollars available to appropriate to our national parks and other pressing needs. We're pleased to be a supporter—among so many other diverse stakeholders—of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, and are appreciative that the former chairman of this subcommittee, Mr. Simpson, is a lead supporter. We are urging Congress to move this important legislation forward.

We respect the importance of enhancing this subcommittee's 302(b) allocation so as chair of the Green Group appropriations team, I have spearheaded community efforts to emphasize this need.

Finally, this subcommittee was extremely helpful last year when it proposed an extension of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which was extended through the end of FY 15. Unfortunately, with the likelihood of authorizing legislation passing both houses this year in question, we ask that you include another one-year extension in this year's bill, to ensure that the National Park Service retains annual fee authority at the end of this calendar year.

Mr. Chairman, it seems as if there is always a good deal of talk on capitol Hill about what the American people want and what the American people expect and deserve, and so on. Recent events have made the views of the American people about their national parks as clear as ever. Their love affair with the national parks spans time, region, economic status and political persuasion. During the government shutdown, we heard from the American people how much they love the parks and want them open and well-staffed. Polling we have previously shared with this committee conducted by Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research indicated that 9 out of 10 likely voters agree that funding for our national parks should be held stable or increased. A bipartisan majority of Americans (73%) believe it is important that the parks are fully restored and ready for the national park centennial in 2016.

As that milestone 100th anniversary approaches, the national parks will be more and more at the forefront of people's minds, and more and more Americans will be drawn to visit a national park or park unit, as will many others from around the world. Will Americans be proud of what they find? Will pride in our heritage and shared experience be evident when they visit? If the parks they visit are not in a condition worthy of their legacy, who will they blame?

Overall, the budget for the National Park Service constitutes less than 1/15th of one 1% of the entire federal budget, and our research shows that the average American household pays roughly as much in taxes for their national parks as it would cost them to buy a large coffee at Starbucks. Surely we can find a way to meet this important federal responsibility to restore our parks during the lead-up to the parks 100th anniversary. Now more than ever, taking care of the national parks should be a priority. We thank this subcommittee for its leadership and are eager to work with you to ensure our national parks are protected this year, and for generations to come.