



**Statement of Richard G. Ring
Coalition to Protect America's National Parks
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives
Hearing on FY 2020 Budget for the National Park Service**

February 26, 2019

Rep. McCollum, Rep. Joyce, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (Coalition) regarding the FY 2020 Budget for the National Park Service.

I am a member of the Coalition, and have served on the Executive Council for the last five years. I retired in 2004 after 35 years of government service, including 33 with the National Park Service (NPS). This work included service as superintendent of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks, and as associate director, park operations and education, and associate director of administration, business practices, and workforce development.

The Coalition is comprised of more than 1,600 members who collectively have more than 35,000 years of experience managing and protecting national parks. We believe that our parks and public lands represent the very best of America, and advocate for their protection.

National parks host millions of visitors annually who come to enjoy the spectacular natural, historic, and cultural resources that the parks preserve. The National Park Service also touches the lives of even more of our citizens through a number of grant and technical assistance programs, which facilitate the preservation of our nation's natural, cultural, and historic resources in a partnership between the National Park Service and hundreds of individuals and organizations throughout the country.

This work would not be possible without regular, annual appropriations from Congress to support over 23,000 employees and 400,000 volunteers who are dedicated to preservation and guiding the enjoyment of these special places. The Coalition is relieved that the FY 2019 budget for the National Park Service was finally enacted after the long, partial federal government shutdown. We are particularly pleased to see that Congress rejected the large budget cuts presented by the administration and, instead, produced a bipartisan Department of the Interior Appropriations Act as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which provided \$3.22 billion for NPS, which is \$20 million above the amount from FY 2018, and \$521 million above the president's request.

We are pleased that there is an additional \$6.2 million for more park rangers, for we fully appreciate that more rangers are needed to ensure that the needs of park visitors are met and that park resources are protected. Also, we are glad to see fixed costs being provided to NPS so that park and program office staffing levels do not suffer further erosion because they have to absorb these costs within their existing budgets. And we welcome inclusion of modest amounts of funding for newly established parks to ensure that protection and visitor services are established as soon as possible at these sites.

Further, we welcome the continued support of the construction program and the Centennial Challenge funds as a means of addressing the deferred maintenance backlog. Additionally, the support provided for historic preservation programs and our heritage areas will help maintain both park resources and significant structures found throughout the country.

It is somewhat unusual to be appearing before the subcommittee to discuss the upcoming FY 2020 National Park Service budget without having a proposed budget from the administration. Since the partial shutdown of the federal government has delayed the release of the administration's budget, we will base our requests on the recently enacted appropriations bill for FY 2019.

We continue to hear so much discussion about the maintenance backlog of the National Park Service that we worry that the deferred maintenance backlog is the only issue facing the NPS that gets attention from members of Congress and the public. Accordingly, our goal is to encourage comprehensive understanding about what is needed to protect the important natural, historic, and cultural resources under the care of the Park Service, as well as what is needed to provide for a quality visitor experience. Clearly, adequate levels of annual appropriations are required to ensure the best possible visitor experience, to ensure that irreplaceable resources are protected, and to address the maintenance backlog,

Even with the increased appropriations provided during the last two fiscal years by this subcommittee, parks are not yet able to achieve these basic purposes. Parks still suffer from significant reductions in staffing over the past decade due to decreased annual appropriations over that time period. To put this in perspective, appropriations for the National Park Service were \$3.275 billion in FY 2009, a full ten years ago. This is \$53 million more than was just appropriated for NPS in FY 2019. With inflation increasing by 17.3% since 2009, the NPS would need \$3.84 billion in appropriations this year just to stay even with inflation. Thus, the Coalition requests NPS appropriations be increased by \$565 million in FY 2020 to bring the NPS back to the level of services the agency provided back in FY 2009.

NPS annual appropriations must be spread thinner as Congress continues to increase the responsibilities given to the Park Service through the addition of new parks and programs. Over the last 10 years, NPS has been directed to manage 27 new parks, 5 more national trails, 5 new wild and scenic rivers, and to coordinate assistance for 3 new affiliated areas and 9 national heritage areas, along with 8 grant programs. Park visitation remains high with 331 million people visits in 2016, with an estimated \$18.2 billion economic impact in local gateway regions. While this record-breaking attendance was no doubt fueled by the Centennial celebration, and

was slightly lower in 2017, it is clearly a reflection of the importance that these special places have in the mind of the American public. Effectively managing these demands is proving more and more challenging with funding that has not kept up with the Park Service's costs.

While operational needs are absolutely essential, NPS continues to have a large land acquisition backlog. At the end of 2016, an estimated \$2.1 billion was identified as necessary to purchase privately owned lands within current park boundaries that have been identified in land protection plans. These properties represent the minimum interest necessary to protect resource values within the park. Unfortunately, this Administration has adopted a freeze-the-footprint goal, which blocks acquisition of key parcels and leaves them vulnerable to incompatible development. And this policy remains in place even though \$900 million a year is being placed in the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) solely for land acquisition purposes and at a time Congress is on the verge of permanently reauthorizing LWCF.

In a similar manner, a number of historic structures across the country are in danger of being lost because of inadequate appropriations from the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF). As required by law, \$150 million a year goes into this fund; but appropriations have not kept pace with the need.

Likewise, the NPS relies on partnerships with a number of groups and organizations, including educational institutions, to carry out cooperative agreements, technical assistance, and grant programs. Unfortunately, grant programs are constantly targeted for reductions or elimination during the annual budget request process, which contributes to uncertainty among many long-standing partners.

While the modest increase in appropriations for construction in the FY 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act will put a dent in the deferred maintenance backlog, funding remains inadequate to reduce the backlog in a meaningful way. With a backlog of \$11.6 billion, more needs to be done. Half of this backlog is the result of thousands of miles of roads, bridges, and other supporting structures that are in dire need of repair. The highly publicized needs at the Arlington Memorial Bridge are just one example of this backlog.

And it is this large group of assets, with many being decades old, which has contributed to the rising maintenance backlog. With more visitors coming to the parks, this only puts additional stress on the structures found in the parks.

Unfortunately, the backlog of facility restoration and maintenance needs continues to grow in the absence of adequate funding. And we know that repairing park buildings and other assets will mean nothing if annual funding is not adequate to maintain them. We also know that over the last several years, funds dedicated to recurring maintenance needs have not kept up, resulting in further backsliding in addressing the backlog. There are projects ready to go all across the country. Completing these projects with an infusion of funding could make an immediate and tangible difference in the parks.

The National Park Service had previously estimated in its FY 2017 budget that \$400 million a year was needed to restore and maintain in good condition all of its highest-priority non-transportation assets within ten years. Because it is unlikely that annual appropriations will

increase by this much, the National Park Service needs a dedicated source of funding to address the backlog. Similar to the structure of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Historic Preservation Fund, the Coalition believes a dedicated source of revenue for a maintenance backlog fund is required, such as that being proposed in the Restore Our Parks Act. There will be no reduction in the backlog if such a revenue stream is unreliable from year to year. And this revenue must be in addition to current annual appropriations and not supplant annual funding.

Finally, the Coalition remains very concerned about the proposed reorganization of the Department of the Interior initiated by former Secretary Zinke. We are told that the Acting Secretary continues to pursue this very costly scheme despite presenting no reasonable rationale why such a reorganization is needed. In our view, it is unfortunate that the recently enacted appropriations bill provided some initial funding requested for the reorganization.

We are reassured, however, that you have prohibited the department and its bureaus from implementing any part of a reorganization that modifies regional boundaries currently in effect until you have received a reprogramming request that details the anticipated efficiencies and cost-savings, a description of anticipated personnel impacts, and funding changes anticipated to implement the proposal. The Coalition is convinced the administration has not presented any good rationale for pursuing such a reorganization for the National Park Service and we urge you to continue to oppose any reprogramming request for this purpose as a waste of money that can be better used to support the numerous needs of the Park Service outlined above.

We recognize the challenges the subcommittee confronts in providing appropriations for all of the programs under its jurisdiction. We are committed to working with you in helping to ensure sufficient resources are available for our national parks to fulfill the mandate enacted by Congress to protect the resources of the parks unimpaired for future generations, while also making them available for the public to enjoy.

That concludes my statement. I would be glad to respond to any questions you might have.