

TESTIMONY OF CATHY L. HELM  
INSPECTOR GENERAL, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION  
DECEMBER 16, 2021

Chairperson Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the role of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in the oversight of the Smithsonian Institution (Smithsonian). The Smithsonian is the world's largest museum and research complex, including 21 museums and galleries, 9 research facilities, and the National Zoological Park. OIG's mission is to promote the Smithsonian programs' efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity through independent and objective audits and investigations.

Every year, we conduct an independent assessment of the key risks and management issues facing the Smithsonian, and we issue an audit plan to focus on those areas. As a result, we have conducted numerous audits concerning the management of the collections, facilities, financial reporting, human resources, information security, and procurement.

Today I will focus on OIG's oversight of the Smithsonian's long-standing challenges related to the management of its collections and facilities, as well as the challenges that the Smithsonian has identified as threats from climate change.

### **Collections at Risk in Substandard Spaces**

As a steward of the national collections, the Smithsonian has the unique responsibility to manage and preserve these collections held in trust. Assembled over 175 years, the national collections contain more than 155 million items, of which 146 million are at the National Museum of Natural History. They include irreplaceable icons of the nation, examples of everyday life, and scientific material vital to the study of the world's natural and cultural heritage, covering subjects from art to zoology. Less than 2 percent of the Smithsonian's collections are on display in the museums at any given time. Collections include objects, natural specimens, artifacts, and other items acquired, preserved, and maintained for public exhibition, education,

and study. The collections play a vital role in advancing scientific knowledge, addressing societal issues, and increasing the historical literacy of the nation.

We have done extensive work concerning collection stewardship, particularly at the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum; National Air and Space Museum; National Museum of African American History and Culture; National Museum of American History; National Museum of the American Indian; and the National Museum of Natural History. Our audits found a pattern of issues, such as inadequate preservation practices, insufficient inventory controls, and security of collections that do not meet Smithsonian standards. For related OIG products, see Enclosure I.

For example, during our audit of the National Museum of American History, we found that many collections were stored in substandard conditions not conducive to long-term preservation.<sup>1</sup> Some storage equipment and buildings were deteriorating and contained potentially damaging or hazardous materials—such as lead, asbestos, and arsenic—that posed risks to staff and collections. In some cases, pipes had frequent leaks that threatened collections. Furthermore, the museum did not have a comprehensive preservation program to mitigate the deterioration of storage spaces and risk to objects.

We were particularly troubled by the collections storage conditions at the Paul E. Garber Facility in Suitland, Maryland. Approximately 400,000 objects stored at this facility were especially at risk of damage. Built in the 1950s and 1960s, these buildings have exceeded their intended useful lives as temporary storage. Some were contaminated with hazardous substances, and many are inadequate to withstand natural disasters. The collapse of one of the buildings from snow and wind in February 2010, and damage to other buildings from the earthquake in August 2011, clearly demonstrated the risk to the collections. Since our report, management has done work to address some of the deficiencies of the collections space at the Garber Facility.

In addition, we found that Smithsonian-wide improvements were needed to collections storage areas. In response to our recommendation, the Smithsonian completed its collections space planning initiative in 2014. The initiative included the first comprehensive survey of the

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<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian OIG, *Audit of Collections Stewardship of the National Collections at the National Museum of American History – Preservation and Physical Security*, A-10-03-2 (Washington, D.C.: September 30, 2011).

condition of the storage spaces for the Smithsonian's collections, which found that 47 percent of the space used to store collections was unacceptable. The Smithsonian developed a 30-year plan to improve collections space conditions, which will cost an estimated \$1.3 billion dollars (in 2013 dollars), or more than \$1.5 billion dollars today, to fully implement.<sup>2</sup>

Our recommendations from these audits have closed, but collection management will always be a perennial challenge for the Smithsonian as collections continue to grow and age, preservation standards change, and technologies evolve. We have an audit in progress that is a Smithsonian-wide assessment of collecting units' development and implementation of inventory plans.

### **Deferred Maintenance is a Growing Challenge**

The Smithsonian faces long-standing challenges in the deferred maintenance of its more than 600 facilities. Deferred maintenance refers to maintenance and repair activities that were not performed when they should have been. More than half of the Smithsonian's buildings are more than 35 years old, and six are designated as National Historic Landmarks. The Smithsonian generally uses federal appropriations to pay for the maintenance of its facilities. When the amount of work needed exceeds the funds available, the Smithsonian must defer some or all of the work.

Deferring maintenance work can reduce the overall life of facilities and may lead to higher costs in the long term. Eventually the work requires a capital investment. In fact, the Smithsonian is currently working on a \$729 million capital project to revitalize the National Air and Space Museum, which includes hundreds of millions of dollars in deferred maintenance.

In 2016, we reported that the Smithsonian has not reduced the backlog of deferred maintenance because it is spending less than the recommended amounts to maintain the condition of its facilities.<sup>3</sup> The National Research Council recommends that government-funded organizations

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<sup>2</sup> Smithsonian OIG, *Collections Management: Progress Made with Initiatives to Improve Inadequate Storage and Undertake Digitization, but Key Challenges Remain*, A-13-11 (Washington, D.C.: September 14, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Smithsonian OIG, *Deferred Maintenance: The Smithsonian Generally Followed Leading Management Practices, but Reducing Its Backlog Remains a Challenge*, OIG-A-16-06 (Washington, D.C.: March 30, 2016).

spend 2 to 4 percent of the current replacement value of their facilities on maintenance. The Smithsonian has been spending approximately 1 percent on maintenance annually. Since the completion of our audit, the deferred maintenance backlog has increased to \$1.13 billion for fiscal year 2021. The Smithsonian estimates that it needs to spend \$180 million to \$360 million each year to keep up with needed maintenance. In the fiscal year 2022 budget request, the Smithsonian requested \$116.9 million, about 65 percent of the lowest estimated need. Given the disparity, the deferred work will continue to grow and must be managed. During this decade, the Smithsonian estimates that the deferred maintenance backlog will grow by 232 percent.

### **Climate Change Presents Additional Challenges**

The Smithsonian has facilities and collections in areas that may be affected by flooding, storm surge, and rising sea levels. In 2014, the Smithsonian released a statement concluding that scientific evidence demonstrates that the global climate is warming as a result of increasing levels of atmospheric greenhouse gases generated by human activities.<sup>4</sup> The statement also identifies four ways that the Smithsonian will respond to climate change by: (1) protecting its core asset, the national collections; (2) operating its facilities and programs in a sustainable manner; (3) increasing knowledge of the human and natural environment through research; and (4) making its findings available to the public.

This year, the Smithsonian issued a *Climate Change Action Plan*.<sup>5</sup> This plan, combined with its 2014 statement, is considered to be the backbone of how the Smithsonian is preparing for and mitigating the impacts of climate change, as well as its steps to create a more sustainable future. For example, the plan identifies ongoing and planned projects to reduce the impact of flooding in vulnerable areas on the National Mall and in New York City, such as renovation projects that will incorporate relocating collections internally within museums on the National Mall. The plan also notes that the Smithsonian needs to update its vulnerability assessments related to flooding based on the latest National Climate Assessment. And finally, the plan identifies challenges that the Smithsonian faces in maintaining ongoing resources for flood protection with competition from other Smithsonian priorities, including the development of two

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<sup>4</sup> *Smithsonian Statement on Climate Change*, Press Release (Washington, D.C.: October 2, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Smithsonian Institution, *Climate Change Action Plan* (Washington, D.C., August 13, 2021).

new museums and major revitalizations of four museums and the Smithsonian Institution Building (commonly referred to as the Castle).

We have not evaluated this action plan or its implementation. However, during our annual risk assessment process, we will include this area in our consideration for future work.

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The Office of the Inspector General looks forward to continuing its efforts to provide independent and effective oversight of the Smithsonian and working with the Board of Regents, Congress, and Smithsonian management on important issues.

Thank you, Chairperson Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Committee. This concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have.

## **Enclosure 1: Related Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Reports and Testimonies**

Hearing before the Committee on House Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution* (September 18, 2019).

*Deferred Maintenance: The Smithsonian Generally Followed Leading Management Practices, but Reducing Its Backlog Remains a Challenge* (OIG-A-16-06, March 30, 2016).

*Collections Management: Progress Made with Initiatives to Improve Inadequate Storage and Undertake Digitization, but Key Challenges Remain* (A-13-11, September 14, 2015).

Hearing before the Committee on House Administration, *Collections Stewardship at the Smithsonian* (July 17, 2013).

*Audit of Collections Stewardship of the National Collections at the National Museum of American History – Preservation and Physical Security* (A-10-03-2, September 30, 2011).

*Audit of Collections Stewardship at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum* (A-11- 02, September 12, 2011).

*Audit of Collections Stewardship of the National Collections at the National Museum of American History – Inventory Controls* (A-10-03-1, February 8, 2011).

*Audit of Physical Security and Inventory Control Measures to Safeguard the National Collections at the National Air and Space Museum* (A-09-04, March 17, 2010).

*Audit of Physical Security and Inventory Control Measures to Safeguard the National Collections at the National Museum of Natural History* (A-05-06, September 29, 2006).