

**Testimony of Kristen Brengel**  
**Senior Vice President, Government Affairs, National Parks Conservation Association**  
**For the Oversight Hearing “The Great American Outdoors Act: Modernizing and Maintaining National**  
**Parks to Celebrate America’s 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary”**  
**Grand Teton National Park, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025**

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman and Members of the Committee, I am Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading national, independent voice for protecting and enhancing America’s National Park System for present and future generations. We appreciate the opportunity to testify at this hearing, which is strategically timed as we both look to renew the Great American Outdoors Act’s (GAOA) National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) this year and as we prepare to mark our nation’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Congress’ bipartisan investment in GAOA has been transformational and has resulted in more than a thousand projects throughout the country repairing infrastructure in our national parks and other public lands, while also conservating these lands through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This landmark accomplishment is an investment in America’s heritage and the legacy we’ll leave for future generations. These are more than construction projects; they provide local job opportunities, engage youth in stewardship and trade fields like masonry and carpentry, and contribute to local gateway economies. These investments are preparing the parks for the future by upgrading the facilities to meet the modern world and the next generation of visitors, while also making them stronger to withstand catastrophic weather events.

Until GAOA, our national parks went more than fifty years without the robust investment that is needed to maintain more than 75,000 assets, a collection second only to the Department of Defense in its magnitude. National Park Service (NPS) visitor centers, campsites, trails, roads, parking lots, bridges, drinking and wastewater systems were in desperate need of repair –some failing and beyond their lifecycle – and in urgent need of upgrades to meet modern standards. In addition to the aging, outdated and degraded infrastructure, the NPS struggles with a significant operational shortfall due to years of insufficient appropriations and understaffing that has become worse since a series of deferred resignations, early retirements and terminations this year. As outlined below, the LRF has been incredibly successful in addressing the maintenance needs in our national parks and other public lands, but the fund expires this year, and much work remains to be done. NPS estimates that “more than one billion dollars is needed annually for preventative and recurring maintenance and component renewal activities just to keep the portfolio of assets at a steady state.”

Since the historic bipartisan achievement of GAOA, NPS has addressed \$4.7 billion in deferred maintenance, improving over 2,350 assets, including more than 420 historic landmark assets, 370 roads and bridges, more than 570 miles of trails and greater than 40 campgrounds and picnic areas to ensure visitors have safe and enjoyable experiences. This includes two of the largest campgrounds in the park system—Zion and Yosemite – which have been updated, modernized and brought into full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards. The campgrounds now have hundreds of sites to accommodate thousands of visitors per night, including walk-ins. Specifically in Yosemite National Park, funds from the GAOA rehabilitated the Tuolumne Campground that includes 304 drive-in campsites that serve over 141,000 visitors per year. The project

included repairing campground roads, adding hardened campsite parking pads and making accessibility improvements, enhancing campsites with new picnic tables, fire rings, and bear-proof food storage containers, and replacing the entire water system to support existing and new visitor restrooms.

Beyond Zion and Yosemite, the LRF has demonstrated its impact at NPS sites across all 50 states and several territories, ensuring the integrity and protection of irreplaceable resources. And as more projects reach completion, billions more dollars of deferred maintenance will be taken off the books.

Without the LRF, many of these critical projects would still be waiting indefinitely for repairs. Facilities could lose functionality or be forced to close, and key infrastructure could fall into irreparable disrepair. For example, in 2018, the Texas White House, the central feature of the Lyndon Baines Johnson National Historical Park, closed due to structural deficiencies that created a danger for the public. Thanks to [an LRF investment](#), the renovated home will once again be open to the public and historic resources will be better preserved. At Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the beautiful 48-mile South Unit Scenic Road was closed and inaccessible to the public since 2019 after multiple landslides left it in disrepair. This closure has been especially significant, as many visitors to the park typically experience the park by driving this loop road. LRF funding is restoring access to trails, pullouts and viewsheds; improving medical and fire response time; and allowing visitors to drive the full scenic drive. It will also help support the gateway economy of Medora, North Dakota that relies on park visitors having an inspiring experience.

National park visitors also rely on potable water and the comfort of flush toilets, but many water and wastewater systems needed replacement to ensure public health and park functionality. LRF investments have now repaired and updated these systems to handle extreme temperatures, mineralized water, flash floods and increased visitation. Grand Canyon, Death Valley and Yosemite National Parks; Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument; and Glen Canyon and Lake Mead National Recreation Areas all have new and improved water systems because of LRF funding. Millions of visitors will be served by these important improvements.

Among the many notable projects is Hot Springs National Park, where just last month we [witnessed a groundbreaking](#) at the Maurice Bathhouse. This project is restoring a centerpiece of our history by rehabilitating its architecture while enhancing safety for new lease holders. Ultimately this project, bolsters the park's contribution to the local, regional and national economies. In 2023, 2.5 million park visitors spent \$184 million visiting Hot Springs, supporting nearly 2,600 jobs.

Projects at or near completion that improve the visitor experience include work at [Grand Teton National Park](#), where roads have been repaved, a bridge has been reconstructed, and parking areas and the southern entrance station have been upgraded. Additionally, NPS has been improving the Colter Bay wastewater main lift station at Grand Teton and replacing the roof and addressing safety needs at its headquarters.

Among the more than two dozen LRF-funded projects in Wyoming (the state is receiving the third highest amount of DOI LRF dollars following Arizona and California) are several key road improvement projects. The Lewis River Bridge, which had deteriorated significantly, has now been fully rebuilt – serving as a vital connector for visitors between Yellowstone and Grand Teton. Another impressive bridge project in Yellowstone's northeast corner spans the Yellowstone River. Once completed, the project will replace the old 1961 bridge with pedestrian access, realign one mile of the Northeast

Entrance Road to restore the original Lost Creek, build new pull-outs and trailhead parking lots, and restore the landscape to pre-1960 conditions. These improvements will be a game-changer for both visitors and the river ecosystem.

LRF-funded projects are also modernizing facilities with design elements and materials that ensure greater resilience to weather conditions and events, enhance energy efficiency, and ensure accessibility for people with disabilities. For example, the [replacement of the roof of historic Mammoth Cave Hotel](#) corrected a substantial design flaw that had regularly caused water damage. The project also reconfigured the lobby to improve the visiting experience with a more open and inviting gathering space for visitors. Without this funding, the hotel was at risk of decaying into disrepair to the point that visitor access could have been compromised or halted.

Parks across the country have faced catastrophic weather events from floods and avalanches to landslides and wildfires. The GAOA provides a critical opportunity for NPS and agencies to better prepare for these inevitable impacts and build sustainable infrastructure as we anticipate future challenges.

Other successful projects at NPS sites include the restoration of the [Cuyahoga National Park tow path](#) in Ohio; fire-proof facilities for fossils and artifacts at [Craters of the Moon, Hagerman Fossil Beds and Minidoka](#) in Idaho; replacement of the electric line at the historic and popular Kettle Falls Hotel at Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota; and repair of [Mammoth Cave's Echo River Spring Trail](#) in Kentucky. Please visit [our website](#) to learn more about the successful GAOA projects, including [LRF success stories](#). The [Department of the Interior \(DOI\)](#), [NPS](#) and US Forest Service ([USFS](#)) also maintain robust websites dedicated to the LRF including a DOI [fact sheet](#) summarizing five years of LRF investments.

Chairman Westerman, years ago, you raised concerns about geographic equity. We shared your concerns about the need for more parks to benefit from this massive investment, especially after initial funding focused on expensive, long-delayed projects in larger parks. We are pleased to report that DOI and Park Service staff responded to our requests. Today, every state and most territories have projects, and more money has gone to Maintenance Action Teams (MATs), increasing the funding for these teams from \$14 million to \$25 million per year, stretching funding even further. MATs can address multiple projects throughout several parks at one time, from repairing brick work at historic sites to fixing trails and staircases, among other projects. MATs have completed hundreds of smaller projects with little overhead, engaging youth corps and training the next generation of stewards with valuable skills. As a result, LRF investments are reaching parks across the country – urban and rural, with projects both large and small. We believe the NPS and other federal agencies should robustly fund MATs in the upcoming legislation.

These projects ensure that visitors can enjoy facilities not only in national parks, but across DOI's agencies and on USFS lands. For example, the Hamburger Rock campground in the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Canyon County District in Utah received much needed repairs to ten campsites around its uniquely shaped rock formation. Prior to this project, the campground required frequent maintenance due to poor drainage. At the same time these deficiencies were corrected, the signage and vault toilets were also upgraded and improved for visitors. Other projects across five Ranger Districts of Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands improved or reconstructed dams and upgraded electrical

needs in campgrounds, all improving visitor access and recreational opportunities for millions of visitors every year.

Numerous projects are also repairing NPS sites central to our history and especially relevant to America's upcoming 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For example, the iconic First Bank—the first building designed specifically for the new federal government after the American Revolution—is receiving critical repairs. With additional funding from a park partner, the project is replacing the leaking roof and stabilizing, cleaning and repairing the aging marble and brick masonry. The interior renovations include repairing walls, replacing an elevator, updating the electrical and HVAC systems, and adding accessible restrooms and a fire suppression system. Five million visitors enjoy Independence Hall every year, and now this building will be refreshed and improved for decades to come. Other projects include [improvements to the carpentry shop and log barn](#) at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, [repairs to the historic fort](#) that serves as the foundation for the Statue of Liberty and its pedestal, and restoration of the Jefferson Memorial exterior, including the marble colonnade. The LRF is fixing and safeguarding parks, memorials and monuments that tell critical stories about America's history.

Across all federal land management agencies, LRF projects support an estimated 20,000 jobs annually and are contributing more than \$10 billion to the economy over the five years of the GAOA, including by employing local contractors. These economic benefits are on top of the robust economic benefits from visitor tourism: over 330 million visitors to NPS lands contribute over \$55 billion in economic output and support 415,000 private-sector jobs each year.

The agencies have made significant progress from 20 years ago when the George W. Bush administration first began recording deferred maintenance projects. At that time, [NPS Director Fran Mainella spoke](#) to this committee about developing the first NPS system to grade the condition of the facilities by stating the following:

*"Over the last three years, the National Park Service has undertaken a full inventory of its assets, determined what their condition is, and identified what repairs or changes in facility management are needed," she said. "With this system, the National Park Service can set targets each year to improve facility grades and achieve an overall acceptable condition for facilities. Our management changes will enable the agency to take care of park assets far more effectively and efficiently than in the past."*

At that time, in 2004, the administration was hoping to work with Congress on a multi-year, multi-billion-dollar effort to repair national park units. Unfortunately, Congress appropriated some maintenance increases, but not at the level the administration requested and needed to stem the problem. NPS then continued to track deferred maintenance but through an unrefined, older system. With the injection of funding from GAOA, DOI and NPS modernized and improved their condition assessments, cost estimates, and project management. The department and NPS quickly established a new program and have been able to move projects in record time, while also stretching these dollars to conduct repairs in hundreds of park units and across other federal public lands. NPCA commends DOI and NPS for going above and beyond to fix our parks. This program has kept administrative costs down while maximizing funding for more projects, and we are confident these dedicated staff can continue this critical and successful work when the GAOA is extended.

We also want to applaud the United States Senate for introducing the America the Beautiful Act (S. 1547), which extends the LRF an additional eight years with two billion dollars annually committed to repairing infrastructure in NPS sites and other public lands. The bill currently has 24 bipartisan cosponsors, and we hope it will move through the committee this year. We commend this committee for its interest in companion legislation that we hope can move swiftly.

### **Staffing**

Unfortunately, this historic opportunity comes at a time when the NPS is facing an unprecedented crisis. Since January, the NPS has lost over 24% of its permanent workforce, resulting in visitor center closures and reduced hours, diminished maintenance and custodial services, and public health and safety issues—among other impacts. More than a hundred superintendent and key leadership positions remain vacant, and essential work to protect irreplaceable resources is falling behind or deferred indefinitely due to a series of deferred resignations and an ongoing hiring freeze. Resource protection is suffering significantly, with only skeleton crews of permanent staff. And late onboarding of seasonal employees has further strained operations at many parks during peak visitation season. While seasonal employees are important, they are no replacement for professional career staff who manage and steward our parks.

Below is a timeline of Executive Orders, memos and directives in chronological order that have been impacting and undermining the NPS workforce.

#### **January 20, 2025 – Federal government hiring freeze**

The administration implements a federal government hiring freeze, which continues to restrict the Park Service's ability to fill vacant positions.

#### **January 23-31, 2025 – Rescinded job offers**

The administration's hiring freeze forces the NPS to rescind more than 2,000 positions across the country with peak visitation season looming.

#### **January 28, 2025 – “Fork in the Road” buyouts**

The administration emails federal workers offering buyouts to resign or stay in their jobs with no guarantee their positions would be safe.

#### **February 11, 2025 – Reorganization and reduction in force (RIF) plans**

The administration directs federal agencies to submit reorganization plans and prepare for large-scale firings.

#### **February 14, 2025 – Probationary employees terminated**

The administration terminates 1,000 Park Service employees – weeks or months into a new job in their period of evaluation before increased job protections.

#### **February 18, 2025 – Seasonal staff exempted**

The administration exempts up to 7,700 seasonal Park Service jobs from the hiring freeze. By June, we learn only about 4,500 seasonal positions were filled, much lower than the

administration's target. This has compromised both the protection of resources and visitor experience.

**February 24, 2025 – Credit card freeze and travel ban**

The administration bans travel beyond 50 miles and caps government credit card spending at a dollar, stripping parks of the ability to buy even basic necessities like soap and toilet paper. Weeks later, limited credit cards are reinstated; for instance, some large parks now share four credit cards, creating significant inefficiencies in day-to-day spending and park management.

**February 25, 2025 – Park staff resign under buyout offer**

More than 700 Park Service staff resign under the administration's "Fork in the Road" buyout offer— a devastating loss of expertise, experience, and institutional knowledge that parks may never recover.

**March 13, 2025 – Initiate Reduction in force (RIF) process**

The administration orders federal agencies to begin reductions in force setting in motion a 90 day process.

**March 17, 2025 – Early retirement offers and voluntary buyouts**

The administration sends early retirement and buyout incentive offers to Park Service employees, coercing staff to either leave or endure the threat of more firings while being stripped of essential tools and resources needed to do their jobs. This is part of the RIF process.

**March 20, 2025 – Probationary staff reinstated**

Due to court orders, the NPS is authorized to fully reinstate 1,000 previously terminated probationary employees at national parks across the country. Not all employees return to the agency.

**April 4, 2025 – More early retirement offers and voluntary buyouts**

The administration sends another notification to pressure dedicated park staff to resign from their jobs or face more arbitrary firings and mounting barriers to doing their work. By June, over 1,800 NPS staff were approved for early retirements or buyouts under the many prompts by the administration.

**April 14, 2025 – Reorganization and relocation deadline for submission**

NPS was required to submit new organizational charts, proposals for relocating staff and offices, potential contract cancelations, and proposed staff reductions to the administration. This plan must be fully implemented by September 30, 2025.

**April 17, 2025 – Hiring freeze extended**

The administration extends the hiring freeze through July 15, 2025, ensuring national parks will continue to face severe staffing restrictions as they head into the busy summer season.

**April 17, 2025 – Order calling for DOI consolidation**

The administration issues an order to consolidate NPS and other agency staff within DOI in the following areas: human resources, information technology, financial management, training and development, international affairs, contracting, communications, Federal financial assistance, and other administrative functions.

**May 12, 2025 – Interior prepares internal list of consolidated staff**

The administration prepares a list of NPS and other agency staff who will be consolidated into DOI. Roughly 1,600 NPS staff are on this list, they are given doi.gov email addresses, but do not have supervisors or new job descriptions.

**June 30, 2025 – NPS workforce database reveals staff loss since January**

Utilizing internal data from the DOI workforce database, the National Park Service has lost 24% of its permanent staff, a staggering reduction that has left many parks across the country scrambling to operate with bare-bones crews.

**July 8, 2025 - Hiring freeze extended for second time**

The administration extends the hiring freeze through October 15, 2025, ensuring national parks will continue to face severe staffing vacancies for positions performing maintenance, natural and cultural resource management, visitor services among other duties.

**July 25, 2025 – Parks required to update operational status**

In response to Secretary's Order 3426, *Ensuring National Parks Are Open and Accessible*, every park unit was required to update its operational status. While not all parks submitted data by July 2025, the information included revealed widespread impacts due to staffing cuts. Ninety national parks reported staffing impacts over the last several months, with nearly 70 parks reducing visitor center hours or visitor services, 22 parks postponing maintenance, and 11 closing or delaying the opening of facilities.

**September 30, 2025 – Deadline to fully implement reorganization or relocation plans**

A recent [New York Times article](#) and other first-hand reports make it clear that staffing shortages are directly impacting park operations across the system. Parks like Joshua Tree and Yosemite are struggling with search and rescue, law enforcement and even basic medical services, while some parks have no maintenance staff at all. Seasonal roads, trails and campgrounds like those at Sequoia & Kings Canyon remain closed due to unaddressed damage. And in remote parks like Cumberland Island, current hiring freezes are limiting the park's ability to prepare for and respond to urgent needs. This summer, law enforcement staff were pulled from their patrol duties to cover visitor centers during the day, leaving many historic sites unpatrolled. Many parks were forced to stop invasive species removal, putting native species and habitats at risk. In Alaska's regional office, limited staffing raises concerns about ongoing resource monitoring to protect wildlife and visitor experiences. If the hiring freeze continues, matters will only get worse.

Decades of institutional knowledge have been lost while a generation of scientists and other aspiring professionals are reluctant to begin a career in an agency that is falling apart. The consolidation of NPS staff within DOI is creating obstacles, causing major delays and inefficiencies in carrying out essential work. The consolidation is effectively acting as a de facto Reduction in Force, undermining NPS' ability to meet its statutory obligations to protect resources and serve visitors—from Human Resources staff hiring seasonals to communications staff providing basic information to visitors. We are concerned that these staff reductions may violate the 1916 NPS Organic Act as amended by the 1978 Redwood Amendments, the 1998 Omnibus National Parks Management Act, and the 2016 Education Mandate among other laws. We believe the National Park Service is essential to protecting and preserving the National Park System. Its dedicated, mission-driven staff maintain standards of professionalism and protection that ensure our parks will be open, accessible and resources in good condition for all to enjoy in perpetuity.

Addressing deferred maintenance in our national parks should be a sustained commitment not only to construction costs, but also to the staff needed to perform and oversee maintenance, repair and reconstruction. Yet progress is being compromised by the lack of NPS staff to ensure construction projects are completed. Due to the hiring freeze, contracting, procurement, engineering, design and other components of construction projects—both LRF and appropriated—are increasingly being delayed. For example, the Denver Service Center (DSC) - the centralized planning, design and construction management office for the NPS—is down 20% of its staff since last October limiting its ability to execute GAOA projects for NPS.

The tremendous loss of staff poses serious challenges for the next construction season and new list of projects. The hiring freeze offers little hope that these positions will be filled anytime soon. We urge this committee to push the administration to lift the hiring freeze for the NPS, reverse the DOI consolidation by putting NPS staff back in their jobs, and prohibit any Reduction in Force.

The NPS manages a world class park system. Hundreds of millions of visitors flock to these iconic places because of their inescapable beauty, wildlife, canyons, glaciers, mountains, coastlines and more. They also go to learn about our history from dinosaurs to indigenous ways of life to the beginning of our democracy and its evolution. We love our national parks, but they can only be protected and preserved with the dedicated and skilled staff to honor and care for them. We look forward to working with this committee to ensure our national parks are well-staffed with the best stewards in the world.

### **Land and Water Conservation Fund**

The bipartisan achievement of GAOA has funded hundreds of successful projects to address deferred maintenance across our public lands while also conserving hundreds of national parks and other federal public lands through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Few places exemplify the success of LWCF better than here at Grand Teton National Park, where LWCF funds were key to the protection of several Wyoming State inholdings threatened by development, most recently the Kelly Parcel. When parcels inside our parks are put up for sale, LWCF is the only means of saving places like the Kelly Parcel, the loss of which would irreparably harm the visitor experience and natural resources at one of our nation's most iconic treasures. The protection of these parcels at Grand Teton has also been central to the migration of the pronghorn antelope that are key to a healthy Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. In national parks and public lands across the country, conservation of inholdings like these has consistently



garnered strong bipartisan support from local, state and federal partners, as well as the public, all of whom recognize that completing our national parks is vital to our heritage and the economy.

LWCF's success in protecting national parks goes far beyond Grand Teton. Recent conservation successes have protected places for sale within [Saguaro National Park](#) in Arizona, [Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Park](#) in Colorado, [Little River Canyon National Preserve](#) in Alabama, and [New River Gorge National Park and Preserve](#) in West Virginia. These and other projects are ensuring and expanding public access and enjoyment, while also bolstering the recreation economy.

Given the overwhelming bipartisan support for LWCF and its importance to rural economies like these, we are alarmed at proposals to undermine LWCF. Private landowners and communities rely on these special places that are in jeopardy of being lost, just like the Kelly parcel. As the Committee proceeds with the vital task of reauthorizing the LRF, we all can take comfort that GAOA permanently committed LWCF's resources, with no additional authorization required, to continue LWCF's critical conservation work into the future.

GAOA was a long-needed investment for both land protection and deferred maintenance at our national parks and other public lands. It was a legislative success and continues to be an on-the-ground success precisely because it addressed both these needs, with guaranteed funding for both LWCF and the LRF. Therefore, we are extremely concerned by the reappearance of proposals to divert LWCF land protection funding to non-conservation purposes--a question that was asked and answered in GAOA.

Such a diversion could actually increase the cost of maintaining our national parks and public lands, since consolidation of public lands through inholding acquisition creates cost-saving management efficiencies. Moreover, any diversion would be illegal and in complete contradiction to the bipartisan agreement in GAOA to fund both conservation and maintenance needs without creating a false choice between the two. The overwhelming bipartisan success of GAOA rests on these two pillars, and to keep that success rolling we need to reauthorize LRF, letting LWCF continue to do its work unhindered.

We are grateful that both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have soundly rejected these misbegotten proposals to divert LWCF. We hope Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman will honor the integrity of GAOA, focusing on the crucial reauthorization of the LRF while honoring the lasting LWCF commitment already in statute.

## **Conclusion**

The Great American Outdoors Act's National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund is a resounding success, measurable in countless ways. Hundreds of our parks' trails have been improved, campgrounds upgraded, visitor centers enhanced, water systems modernized with the latest technology, and historic sites are rehabilitated. The Interior Department and National Park Service staff have done an outstanding job moving projects forward and getting nearly 30% done in this five-year timeline. They also drove these projects ahead during a pandemic when supply chains were not keeping up with demand, when inflation grew, and when they needed to aggressively seek contractors in rural areas where it was a challenge. We know staff are putting their expertise, ingenuity, and mission-driven passion into this work and we thank them.

This law is also delivering significant economic benefits to communities across the country, roughly 20,000 jobs are created every year, youth are learning skills, and communities are planning for the

future knowing their neighboring parks are fixed and ready to serve visitors for decades to come. Now we have the opportunity to extend this law and give more local economies, communities and parks a boost that will allow them to thrive for decades more. We commend you—Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman and members of the committee—for holding this oversight hearing examining this important bipartisan law. We applaud the bipartisan work on legislation to extend GAOA’s Legacy Restoration Fund and stand ready to work with you to ensure this effort is successful.

We also want to work with all of you to ensure a strong, effective workforce at the NPS. We need you to work with the administration to lift the hiring freeze for the NPS, reverse the DOI consolidation by putting NPS staff back in their jobs, and prohibit any Reduction in Force. These actions are increasingly undermining work to address deferred maintenance through LRF and other funding sources, in addition to managing resources and providing essential visitor services.

The American public strongly support our national parks, and Congress has demonstrated bipartisan support through the passage of GAOA and consideration of legislation to extend the LRF. The American people and our parks need congressional support now more than ever.