

Testimony of Mike Ward
Coalition to Protect America's National Parks
For the Legislative Hearing on the discussion draft
"Great American Outdoors Act 250"
Hot Springs National Park, June 12, 2026

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. My name is Mike Ward, and I am testifying on behalf of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks. The Coalition is made up of over 5,000 members, all of whom are current, former or retired employees and volunteers of the National Park Service (NPS). Our goal is to leverage our credibility and integrity to continue supporting the NPS mission and NPS employees and advocating for national park solutions based on the law and sound science.

I spent nearly four decades with the NPS in many roles, including serving as Deputy Regional Director in the Midwest Region as well as Superintendent of Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, Voyageurs National Park and Gateway Arch National Park formerly known as Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. I'm honored to testify in strong support of the reauthorization of the Great American Outdoors Act's (GAOA) National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (Legacy Restoration Fund or LRF) - a critical investment in the long-term health of America's public lands - and specifically on the draft legislation titled the Great America Outdoors Act 250. I am also compelled to address the context in which this bill is being introduced, particularly the loss of NPS staff and what this means for the ability of the agency to address repair needs and much more.

America's national parks are often called our "crown jewels"—places of inspiration, recreation, and reflection. They are more than scenic landscapes and a collection of historic sites; they are the physical embodiment of our shared history, culture, and natural heritage. However, that legacy has been at risk due to decades of underinvestment in infrastructure. I have personally experienced crumbling roads and aging visitor centers, failing support systems, inaccessible trails, unsafe employee housing, and inadequate facilities that limit NPS' ability to serve the American public and protect park resources. Over the last five years, it is clear that projects funded through GAOA's LRF are making a difference. Hundreds of park units are benefiting from this fund. Natural and cultural resources, wildlife, waterways and so much more will be better preserved because of this investment. We are grateful for Congress passing the law and I'm here to tell you it is critical to extend it in order to bring more park assets into good condition.

I should also note that this draft legislation need only address the LRF because GAOA was an historic bipartisan achievement in part because it permanently funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This successful conservation tool has provided nearly \$15 million in funding to protect Hot Springs, and billions more over the last fifty years protecting parks and other public lands throughout the country. The program clearly works and the Coalition commends Congress for the funding enacted in GAOA for perpetuity.

The LRF has been called a gamechanger for good reasons. For the first time in decades, NPS has had access to consistent, dedicated funding to tackle the backlog in a strategic, comprehensive way. In just five years, the LRF has funded hundreds of projects across the country. These projects have:

- Improved visitor safety and access.
- Preserved historic structures.
- Modernized critical drinking water, wastewater, and utility systems.
- Supported good-paying jobs annually in local communities.
- Helped parks become more resilient to future weather events.

The Legacy Restoration Fund is clearly working. It is helping NPS and other public lands agencies turn the tide on decades of deferred maintenance. Reauthorizing it will help ensure that future generations can enjoy safe, accessible, and inspiring public lands. We have seen successes across the Service, but my personal experience is based on 25 projects in Midwest parks that totaled 400 million to address failing infrastructure. Some highlights include:

Removal of 30 vacant non-historic structures at Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Removing these assets will reduce the park's maintenance backlog by more than \$7 million and reforest the vacant lots they were removed from.

Working to rehabilitate access paths at Lincoln Home National Historic Site. Replacing maintenance-intensive and extremely costly wood boardwalks with accessible surfaces and rehabbing paved surfaces to provide safe and accessible movement through the site. Visitors will gain clear access to the neighborhood and the only home Abraham Lincoln owned.

Pavement rehabilitation at three parks in Missouri. This project improves visitor access and provides connections to surrounding communities by repairing access roads. The project supported Ozark National Scenic Riverway, George Washington Carver National Monument, and Wilson's Creek National Battlefield. Over 1.5 million visitors will now experience safer connections to these parks.

And, of course, one need not look no further to see the success of the LRF than here at Hot Springs National Park, which preserves a key part of America's history. The recent groundbreaking at the Maurice Bathhouse shows progress by ensuring public access, enhancing safety and ensuring the preservation of that history.

Recently my wife and I visited Hot Springs and learned about the thermal water system here. An extremely complex collection and distribution system for the very resource that inspired Hot Springs Reservation and then creation of one of our oldest national parks. If I understand correctly the system is over 100 years old. Replacement of a system this complex and this vital to the community is not a small project. It is a project of size and magnitude and most likely LRF is the only way it may be accomplished.

We commend you for your bipartisan commitment to extending the LRF, as it expired on October 1, 2025. The scale of need—across national parks and other Department of the Interior lands as well as, national forests—demands a longer-term commitment.

Reauthorizing this fund is not only fiscally responsible—it's smart policy. LRF projects reduce future costs by addressing repair needs before they become even more costly. Every dollar invested today helps avoid greater expenses down the road. This is about finishing what we started—following through on a promise to the American people to take care of the places they love.

The LRF enjoys strong bipartisan support—and for good reason. National parks are economic engines, generating more than \$56 billion annually and supporting 340,000 jobs due to visitor spending in park gateway communities. Investments in maintenance are investments in gateway communities, small businesses, and the millions of visitors who rely on safe, accessible public lands.

While we support the bill as currently drafted and encourage bipartisan momentum to move it forward, we do want to raise a few concerns and hope they can be resolved as negotiations continue in the House and with the Senate champions.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Provision:

We believe this provision is unnecessary, as most deferred maintenance projects do not warrant a new categorical exclusion under the NEPA. These projects typically occur within previously disturbed areas and involve routine repair or replacement of existing infrastructure, making them well suited for existing NEPA pathways and categorical exclusions.

Outdoor Recreation and Sportsmen's Access Pilot Program:

While outdoor recreation projects are important, this diverts funding that could otherwise be used to directly address deferred maintenance in our national parks, which is the original intention and goal of the Great America Outdoors Act. We encourage removal of this provision or reduction of the percentage of projects from 15% to 10% for national parks.

Oversight and Transparency

Strong congressional oversight and reporting measures are essential to ensure transparency and accountability, and that public funds are spent efficiently and consistently with congressional intent. However, since January 2025, NPS has lost more than 24% of its permanent workforce, straining visitor services, the agency's ability to protect park resources and park operations, including contracting services to ensure these projects move forward. These additional requirements without restoring park staff will only add more burden to an already overwhelmed workforce. We recommend addressing this concern either by removing some of these additional oversights or restoring National Park Service staff to at least 2024 levels or providing binding language ensuring sufficient staff.

Transportation Funding

Transportation projects make up approximately half of the National Park Service deferred maintenance backlog. The Great American Outdoors Act stated that no less than 65% of the funding can be used for non-transportation projects. Coupled with investments through the surface transportation bill, this provided equal amounts for transportation and non-transportation deferred maintenance projects. However, by increasing the amount to 70% for non-transportation projects, the parks will receive less for transportation projects than non-transportation projects unless the next surface transportation bill provides robust increases for the Federal Lands Transportation Program. The current transportation bill under consideration, the U.S. House BUILD America 250 bill does not provide a sufficiently robust investment. We encourage keeping the percentage of non-transportation assets in parks to no less than 65%.

Offsets

The Coalition prefers the previous funding of the remaining energy receipts as the sole source of funding for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund. However, of the additional offsets that were included in the original draft of the America the Beautiful Act 250, we are less opposed to the remaining offsets, though still have concerns.

The Coalition supports increasing the America the Beautiful pass since the pass has not been increased for nearly 20 years and has not kept up with the current economy, and park fees provide an important source of revenue. Fees are intended to augment annual appropriations to enhance visitor experiences by repairing park facilities, supporting educational programs, improving accessibility, and addressing visitor safety concerns. However, given the current constraints on the American population from rising costs for food, gas and other expenses, we are concerned about the impact on the American population at this time and the optics of this increase.

As for expanding the non-resident pass beyond the original 11 most visited parks, we remain concerned about the implementation of the new passes causing operational problems at the entrance gates and deterring visitors from visiting the national parks due to their high cost and the discomfort with park staff requesting proof of citizenship or residency. We want to ensure that all residents and non-residents feel welcome in the national parks. We suggest delaying the implementation of this provision until Congress better understands the impacts of the passes this summer from the 11 parks currently collecting non-resident fees. At a minimum, there should be a requirement that the Department of the Interior study the impacts of these fees on visitors and local economies and report to authorizing and appropriations committees on the results.

Construction Funds

It should also be pointed out that the growth of the maintenance backlog has continued due to the lack of annual funding for day-to-day maintenance of these assets. Over the years, robust funding for the NPS Construction account and relevant park operations sub activities have not been provided. For example, last year NPS' Construction account was cut from \$172 million to \$88 million. Congress needs to provide the funding necessary to maintain these assets for all to enjoy for decades to come. Our parks cannot just rely on extension of the LRF.

Our parks rely heavily on regional and national service centers to support large construction and rehabilitation projects. Loss of staff in areas related to design, compliance, quality control, construction, contracting, and construction management has a direct effect on the capacity of a park to take on these projects.

Staffing

I would also be remiss not to use this opportunity to briefly outline my alarm at how NPS has been decimated since January 2025, with ongoing and overlapping Office of Personnel Management (OPM) rules that are causing additional fears among NPS staff about their ability to keep their jobs and perform them without fear of reprisal. The administration's massive effort to push out dedicated civil servants has forced out more than 4,000 park service staff—more

than a quarter of its workforce. I cannot overstate the devastating impact this has been having on an agency that had already had more than 3,000 fewer people to manage our parks than they had fifteen years ago. These individuals aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet. These are National Park rangers who protect visitors and respond to emergencies. They are historians who preserve our nation's story. They are scientists who safeguard fragile ecosystems, maintenance crews who keep trails open, and staff who ensure our parks remain accessible, safe, and welcoming for future generations.

At a time when visitation remains high and threats such as climate change, extreme weather, and wildfire risk are growing more severe, reducing the workforce responsible for stewarding these public lands is both shortsighted and dangerous.

America's national parks are not luxuries. They are part of our shared heritage. They tell the story of who we are as a nation and preserve landscapes that belong to every American. The men and women who care for them deserve our gratitude, our respect, and the resources necessary to do their jobs.

What is happening behind the scenes should concern every member of this committee. Both maintenance and resource research and protection are falling behind. Critical work to protect our parks is not taking place as so many staff are pressured to leave and as staff forego needed work to try to minimize the impact to visitors. The park facilities that the LRF has been repairing are there in the first place because visitors go to enjoy these irreplaceable resources NPS sites were designated to protect. With such deep staff cuts, the resources are at significant potential of deteriorating or being harmed irreparably. It's critical that we have the staff to repair and maintain park assets, but also to ensure the long-term preservation of park resources as well as a safe and inspiring visitor experience. All of this requires staff, and NPS has been losing them at an alarming rate.

If we value our national parks—and I believe Americans across the political spectrum do—we must recognize that protecting these places requires investing in the people who make that protection possible.

The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks stands ready to help ensure these places remain the crown jewels of our country.

In summary, while we support the bill as currently drafted and encourage bipartisan momentum to move it forward, we do hope additional modifications can be considered as negotiations continue in the House and with the Senate champions.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.