

**STATEMENT OF JOY BEASLEY, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR CULTURAL RESOURCES, PARTNERSHIPS AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS, CONCERNING H.R. 1316, H.R. 1286, H.R. 1424, H.R. 2024, H.R. 2107, H.R. 3222, H.R. 1154, H.R. 1908, H.R. 1925, H.R. 2359, H.R. 2899, and H.R. 3616, LEGISLATION PERTAINING TO NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS.**

**JUNE 15, 2021**

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Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 1316, to authorize a National Heritage Area Program; on five bills that would establish new national heritage areas, H.R. 1286, H.R. 1424, H.R. 2024, H.R. 2107, and H.R. 3222; and on six bills that would authorize studies of proposed national heritage areas, H.R. 1154, H.R. 1908, H.R. 1925, H.R. 2359, H.R. 2899, and H.R. 3616.

National Heritage Area Program Legislation

The Department recognizes that every one of the 55 national heritage areas that has been established by Congress serves an important role in preserving, interpreting, and promoting the unique natural and cultural characteristics of the area it encompasses. We support establishing a statutory framework for the National Park Service's (NPS) role in administering the national heritage area program, as H.R. 1316 would do, but would like to work with the sponsors and the Committee on revisions to the bill.

National heritage areas foster stewardship of our nation's heritage without creating new park units. Rather than providing direct management, the NPS partners with national heritage area coordinating entities to provide technical and financial assistance. National heritage areas match and leverage federal funds appropriated by Congress to carry out heritage projects and programs in collaboration with local partners, expanding the impact of the federal dollars invested. National heritage area designation does not change land ownership or impose land use controls on any lands (private or otherwise) within the authorized boundary that constitutes a heritage area. Through public-private partnerships, national heritage areas support historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects.

The first national heritage area was designated 37 years ago, and since that time, Congress has established a total of 55 national heritage areas in 34 states. Based on the number of national heritage area proposals that have been introduced in Congress, interest in creating new heritage areas remains high. Each heritage area is designated in perpetuity, but in most cases, Congress has included a federal funding sunset date that is 15 years after the date of enactment, and a funding limit of \$10 million. Congress has typically extended the authorization of funding for heritage areas once a sunset date or funding limit has been reached. This year, 30 of the 55 national heritage areas will require an extension of their authorizations of funding in order to be eligible to receive funds in FY 2022.

The NPS carries out its role in national heritage area activities through its Heritage Partnership Program. This program's responsibilities include evaluating heritage area feasibility studies; evaluating and approving national heritage area management plans; performing evaluations of heritage areas after they have been established for several years; and overseeing the use of funding that Congress provides to individual heritage areas through the NPS. The program performs a significant amount technical support and assistance on an ongoing basis to the existing national heritage areas and to organizations interested in pursuing national heritage area designation. The program's authority is derived from the provisions included in the various laws that established the 55 designated national heritage areas.

H.R. 1316 would recognize national heritage areas as a system, rather than solely as individual entities, and would provide clear statutory authority for the NPS to administer national heritage areas as a program. It would provide uniform standards for conducting feasibility studies, approving management plans, and conducting evaluations. The bill would specify the authorities and responsibilities of the Secretary of the Interior, as well as the authorities and duties of the local coordinating entities. Additionally, it would authorize appropriations of up to \$750,000 per year for each individual national heritage area from fiscal year 2022 to fiscal year 2037, regardless of an individual heritage area's sunset date or spending cap under current law.

The Department supports enacting the bill's authority for the NPS to carry out its role in the operation of heritage area activities, which would provide authority for the NPS's important ongoing responsibilities for national heritage areas. However, we recommend addressing the bill's provisions for conducting feasibility studies, approving management plans, conducting evaluations, and carrying out other activities as they apply to existing laws that established national heritage areas or authorized feasibility studies. Currently, it is unclear whether these provisions would apply to existing national heritage areas and authorized studies, or only to national heritage areas designated and feasibility studies authorized after the enactment of this act. We also recommend revising the bill's 15-year authorization of funding for all current heritage areas to provide for an ongoing authorization of funding for national heritage areas, subject to appropriations.

#### Designation of New National Heritage Areas

Five bills on the agenda would establish new national heritage areas, H.R. 1286, H.R. 1424, H.R. 2024, H.R. 2107, and H.R. 3222. Each one of the proposed areas has unique characteristics that have contributed to the rich tapestry of American history and culture. However, only two, so far, have been found to meet the NPS's criteria for establishment of a national heritage area: H.R. 1286, which would designate the Southern Campaign of the Revolution National Heritage Corridor, and H.R. 1424, which would designate the St. Croix National Heritage Area. The Department supports these two bills and recommends amendments as described below. While they may have merit, the Department recommends Congress consider deferring action on the other three bills while the NPS works with the sponsoring organizations to ensure their feasibility studies meet the criteria for designation. Without such studies, the NPS is not able to assess whether the necessary conditions exist to form and implement national heritage areas that will be successful in preserving and interpreting the resources associated with the history and culture of each of these areas. Studies may be conducted by the NPS through congressional authorization,

or by an entity that submits a study to the NPS for a determination, provided that the study demonstrates that the area meets the same criteria that the NPS would have used if the NPS had conducted the study.

H.R. 1286 would establish the Southern Campaign of the Revolution National Heritage Corridor for the purpose of preserving, promoting, and interpreting resources related to the American Revolutionary War in the Carolinas. H.R. 1286 generally follows the recommendations of the national heritage area feasibility study that was conducted by the NPS pursuant to P.L. 109-338 and transmitted to Congress in 2015. The Department recommends conforming the language used in H.R. 1286 to that typically used in other national heritage area legislation in areas where H.R. 1286 differs, including adding a requirement for non-federal cost sharing. We also recommend developing an updated map for the proposed national heritage area to account for changes since the feasibility study was completed.

H.R. 1424 would establish the St. Croix National Heritage Area for the purpose of preserving, promoting, and interpreting an assemblage of authentic natural, cultural, historic, and scenic features that celebrate the heritage of the inhabitants of the island of St Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. H.R. 1424 generally follows the recommendations of the national heritage feasibility study that was conducted by the National Park Service pursuant to P.L. 109-338 and transmitted to Congress in 2011. The Department recommends conforming the language used in H.R. 1424 to that typically used in other national heritage area legislation in areas where H.R. 1424 differs.

H.R. 2024 would establish the Southern Maryland National Heritage Area, an area that would include portions of St. Mary's, Calvert, Charles, and Prince George's counties. The Department recognizes the significance of this area; however, a feasibility study by a local group is still in progress and has not been completed. If the Committee moves forward with the legislation, the Department recommends conforming the language used in H.R. 2024 to that typically used in other national heritage area legislation in areas where H.R. 2024 differs. We also recommend the development of a legislative map to reference in the bill.

H.R. 2107 would establish the Nation's Oldest Port National Heritage Area, which would include portions of northeast Florida. The NPS has been working with the sponsoring organization on their draft feasibility study and would like to continue to do so to ensure that the study meets the NPS criteria, which will help set the potential national heritage area up for success. If the Committee moves forward with the legislation, the Department recommends conforming the language used in H.R. 2107 to that typically used in other national heritage area legislation in areas where H.R. 2107 differs, specifically adding a federal funding authority amount with a 50% cost-sharing requirement. We also recommend the development of a legislative map as referenced in the bill.

H.R. 3222 would establish the Alabama Black Belt National Heritage Area for the purpose of conserving and interpreting sites and stories central to the American Civil Rights movement within 19 counties in the State of Alabama. The NPS has been working with the sponsoring organization on their draft feasibility study and would like to continue to do so to ensure that the study meets the NPS criteria, which will help set the potential national heritage area up for success. If the Committee moves forward with the legislation, the Department recommends

conforming the language used in H.R. 3222 to that typically used in other national heritage area legislation in areas where H.R. 3222 differs.

### National Heritage Area Feasibility Studies

Six bills on the agenda would authorize studies to determine if areas meet specified criteria for designation as national heritage areas, H.R. 1154, H.R. 1908, H.R. 1925, H.R. 2359, H.R. 2899, and H.R. 3616. The Department supports these bills, as we believe that it is vitally important to assess whether the right conditions exist to form and implement a successful national heritage area before Congress acts to designate a proposed national heritage area. These studies would gather information to help determine whether each area contains an assemblage of natural, historic, and cultural resources that represent distinctive aspects of the heritage of the United States; are worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use; and would be best managed through partnerships among public and private entities. The studies would include public engagement and be conducted in consultation with the various stakeholders in each area. While we support enactment of these bills, we note that there are 25 previously authorized studies for potential units of the National Park System, potential new national heritage areas, and potential additions to the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic Rivers System that have not yet been completed and transmitted to Congress.

The six bills are:

- H.R. 1154, which would authorize a study for designating the Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area. The study area would include the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Suffolk in Virginia, Isle of Wight County in Virginia, and Camden, Currituck, Gates, and Pasquotank counties in North Carolina;
- H.R. 1908, which would authorize a study for designating the Ka‘ena Point National Heritage Area in Honolulu County on the island of O‘ahu, Hawaii;
- H.R. 1925, which would authorize a study for designating the South Kona National Heritage Area, which would include the area between Ka Lae and Honomalino Bay in Hawaii County, Hawaii;
- H.R. 2359, which would authorize a study for designating the Los Caminos Del Rio National Heritage Area in Texas, which would include a portion of the Rio Grande River and surrounding areas;
- H.R. 2899, which would authorize a study for designating areas on the island of Guam as a National Heritage Area; and
- H.R. 3616, which would authorize a study for designating the Bear River National Heritage Area in Utah and Idaho, which would include the main drainage area of the Bear River and several communities and counties in the two states.

Regarding the bills described in this statement for which the Department recommends amendments, we would be pleased to work with the bill sponsors and the Committee to draft those amendments.

Chair Neguse, that concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other Members may have.