

SUBMITTED TESTIMONY
For the Record

Wendy J. Laros, President and CEO
Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce

House Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

South Kona National Heritage Area Act (H.R. 1925)

June 10, 2021

Dear Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, Chairman Neguse, and Ranking Member Fulcher,

On behalf of the Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce, I respectfully request the House Committee on Natural Resources support the passage of the South Kona National Heritage Area Act of 2021 (H.R. 1925), introduced by Representative Kaiiali'i Kahele.

With nearly 500 members, the Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce exists to provide leadership and advocacy for a successful business environment in the Kona and Kohala districts on the west side of Hawai'i Island. Since our founding in 1968, we've worked to enhance the quality of life for our community through a strong, sustainable economy.

We believe South Kona is a very special place filled with unique cultural, historical and natural resources that deserve this special designation. We understand that H.R. 1925 outlines the first step in a multi-year process and calls for a study to assess suitability and feasibility of designating the site as a National Heritage Area.

We know that heritage areas are community-based efforts that contain a mixture of public and private property, historic sites, trails and commercial districts. We realize these areas are different from traditional national parks. For example, land and property ownership in these areas are retained by the owners. The National Park Service (NPS) does, however, work in partnership with heritage areas.

I would like to point out that Hawai'i Island has a long history and strong connection to the NPS. Three parks to highlight include:

- Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park: Established in 1916, this awe-inspiring park includes two active volcanoes - one that recently erupted in 2018! Park visitors can hike through a rainforest into a volcanic crater, venture into a 500 year old lava tube or view one of the most extensive petroglyph (images carved in stone) fields in Hawai'i. According to the State of Hawai'i Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT), this park had over 1.3 million visitors in 2019.

- Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park: Established in 1961, this park is located on the Kona coast and home to some of the most significant traditional sites in the Hawaiian archipelago. Prominent features include the *pu'uhonua* or place of refuge which is enclosed by a massive 965 foot long masonry wall and Hale o Keawe Heiau, a sacred temple that housed the bones of *ali'i* or high chiefs of ancient Hawai'i. This park receives over 400,000 visitors annually (DBEDT, 2019).
- Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park: Established in 1978, this park reveals the ingenuity of the Hawaiian people who thrived in an ancient settlement on the rugged lava rock coastline in North Kona. Features include two large fishponds, a fish trap, petroglyphs, house site platforms and religious sites. Resident green sea turtles often bask on the beach. This park receives over 200,000 visitors annually (DBEDT, 2019).

The tourism industry drives our local economy. In 2019, 1,763,904 visitors arrived on Hawai'i Island (DBEDT, 2019). Although COVID-19 impacts reduced arrivals in 2020, numbers are increasing dramatically in 2021 as vaccinations rollout. As visitors return, community driven destination management is a common theme in Hawai'i.

Ultimately, the South Kona National Heritage Area designation would assist the community in joining together to preserve, promote and manage this distinctive site filled with cultural significance and scenic beauty. This area reflects traditions and customs that are a valuable part of Hawai'i's history and the story of the United States.

We ask that you please support House Resolution 1925 as the first step in this federal process of designating the South Kona National Heritage Area on Hawai'i Island.

Sincerely,



Wendy J. Laros, President and CEO
Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce