

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Tuesday, June 15, 2021
Congressman Paul D. Tonko

Testimony as Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher, for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee and for including my bill, **H.R. 1316, the National Heritage Area Act**, in today's important hearing.

There are currently 55 National Heritage Areas (NHAs) in active operation in communities across America – sites of cultural, historical, or natural significance that help tell our unique and diverse American story.

In New York's 20th Congressional District, these legendary sites include the Erie Canalway National Heritage corridor and the Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley National Heritage Corridor. For decades, these sites have opened wide the doors of economic opportunity and community engagement for New York's Capital Region and beyond.

America's heritage areas are major contributors to cultural tourism. The United States Department of Commerce reviewed this question and estimates that heritage areas contribute a whopping \$192 billion to our national economy every year. These sites are a powerful leverage of public funds, with public and private partnerships matching an average of five dollars and fifty cents for every one dollar in federal funding – a nearly 6 to 1 return on investment for the American taxpayer.

Not only do National Heritage Areas support jobs and foster economic growth through tourism and other community activities, they also instill a deeper sense of places we live and travel. Visitors experience these sites in ways that connect us with America's rich, diverse history and ground that understanding in the deep and often hidden roots of our own communities.

Currently, there is no standardized process for administering National Heritage Areas, which has allowed for sometimes inconsistent oversight and management – a longstanding concern expressed by the National Park Service and others.

My bipartisan National Heritage Area Act, H.R. 1316, establishes, for the first time, standard criteria for designating new National Heritage Areas as well as creating a rigorous process for maintaining existing National Heritage Areas and an oversight structure that will allow these popular sites to continue serving their communities independently while supporting the surrounding economies.

H.R. 1316 would establish a clear, consistent statutory framework for the National Park Service's role in administering the National Heritage Area Program; standardize the process for studying and establishing new heritage areas; modernize the program to allow for long-term

sustainability; address concerns regarding accountability by creating an evaluation process for existing heritage areas; and end the current system of piecemeal reauthorizations through a 15-year authorization for all existing National Heritage Areas.

Without these reforms to streamline the existing system, National Heritage Areas have to expend significant resources pursuing other more isolated funding extensions and reauthorizations, often with last-minute Congressional action. This stop-gap model is puts significant pressure on local administrators and the coordinating entities that run these sites, taking time and resources away from the important work of fixing and restoring these sites in ways that help open our eyes to their diverse stories, open doors for greater community engagement, and generally preserve these important resources. In some cases, these precious local historic sites have fallen, or are in danger of falling, into serious disrepair.

The current piecemeal system makes little sense from a Congressional perspective as well. The funding authorizations for 32 of America's heritage areas are set to expire at the end of this Fiscal Year, meaning that without swift, decisive Congressional action these sites will lose much of their ability to preserve the important resources they were designated to protect and promote cultural tourism—an important economic driver for many of America's local communities as we emerge from the shadow of this pandemic.

President John F. Kennedy, in his 1962 State of the Union address, said, “We are all trustees for the American people, custodians of the American heritage.”

We are the keepers of that heritage and maintaining and preserving these treasured sites is more important than ever. Our work to pursue a bright and equitable present for every American requires that we also be active stewards of our past.

National Heritage Areas connect us, and perhaps more importantly connect future generations, with the voices and places that have shaped who we are as Americans. These sites deliver more than just a significant economic return, they help us reveal the diverse and sometimes hidden gems of our cultural heritage and fill us with a sense of place that connects us to the rich, diverse history of our regions and the deep roots of our communities – and they help bring our complex history to life.

I want to thank my colleague Congressman McKinley for his partnership on this bill, for our shared work supporting National Heritage Areas across the nation, and once again I thank the chair and the members of this Committee for holding today's hearing.