

Statement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI)

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Hearing: Legislative Hearing on Five Regulatory Streamlining and Federal Estate Management Bills: H.R. 2997, H.R. 3025, H.R. 3049, H.R. 3250 and H.R. 4141

Thursday, June 22, 2023; 2:00 pm; 1324 Longworth Building

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, thank you for the opportunity to present my views on **H.R. 3025**, my bill to prohibit the net increase of federally owned land in the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John in my district, the U.S. Virgin Islands. This bill solely relates to the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John, and it is intended to address the specific, long-standing concerns of my constituents related to the growth of the National Park on this small island of the United States.

The Virgin Islands National Park boundary encompasses nearly two-thirds of the island of St. John, which is only 9 miles long and 5 miles wide. The Park includes over seven thousand acres of that land and more than five thousand acres of submerged lands. Thus, this leaves a very finite amount of land for the people of St. John, who are confronting housing shortages that continue to escalate because of the Park's continuing growth. As land is donated and conveyed to the Park, some pre-existing landowners have found themselves landlocked by the Park and without easement, which can take a decade to receive due to bureaucratic processes. The reduction of privately owned land

and subsequent increases in property taxes have made it nearly untenable to retain ancestral homes. The continual expansion of the Park has stymied the Government of the Virgin Islands' ability to create alternative ways to traverse the island, which is vital during a disaster, as seen after the 2017 hurricanes.

Since the Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956, when Laurence Rockefeller transferred nearly five thousand acres of St. John to the U.S. government, private entities and organizations have continued to purchase land with the intention of conveying it to the Park. I share the view that National Parks generally are a wonderful idea, and I am certainly not against conservation practices; but, for the residents of St. John that have called this small island home for the last 3,000 years, the scope of the Park cannot continue to increase.

My legislation addresses their unique needs. Under this bill, individuals and entities would still be able to donate or exchange land with the Park; but if the Park acquires any land, an equal acreage must be conveyed out of federal ownership through a sale, exchange, or donation. This bill would not change the Park boundary, but rather prevents an increase of land owned by the Park. Valid existing property rights within the Park boundary are explicitly protected.

Legislation to address specific concerns about expansion of federal land owned by the National Park Service has happened before under similar circumstances. In 1986, Public Law 99-420 established a permanent boundary for the Acadia

National Park in Maine to ensure that Park could only grow to the extent of the standing boundary, and no further. In 2019, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act further clarified that the Secretary of the Interior does not have the authority to adjust the Acadia National Park's permanent boundaries.

The Virgin Islands National Park Service has a responsibility as a steward and as a partner to the Virgin Islands, but that has not always been the case. Unfortunately, often the Park seems to be solely engaged in protecting land; not the people who were the original inhabitants of that land, nor those brought over as enslaved people who fought for their freedom and through sweat and toil, were able to obtain land on St. John. Albeit sometimes well-intentioned, on St. John, the Virgin Islands National Park has effectively crowded out native people in furtherance of neo-colonial bourgeois ideals acting under the assumption that the local people cannot care for the land themselves. It is not in the interest of the Virgin Islands, and is not the mandate of the Park, for the Park to become an ever-expanding behemoth in a small insular area of the U.S.

As we look at the history and the future of the Virgin Islands National Park, our decisions must be intentional to support St. John, and the entire Virgin Islands – the land, the people, the history, and the culture. With that in mind, I ask for your support for H.R. 3025. Thank you.