

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR CONGRESSIONAL AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS, REGARDING “EXAMINING BARRIERS TO ACCESS: ONGOING VISITOR EXPERIENCE ISSUES AT AMERICA’S NATIONAL PARKS”.

July 27, 2023

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior’s views on the visitor experience at national parks.

National parks are among the most remarkable places in America for recreation, learning, and inspiration. These special places belong to all Americans. The National Park Service (NPS) is honored to care for all parks on behalf of the American people and to welcome them to experience the wonders of their National Park System. We also welcome international visitors, in keeping with our commitment to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout the world.

Visitor enjoyment is a critical part of the NPS mission. The NPS seeks to provide outstanding experiences for all visitors while upholding our mandate to conserve unimpaired each park’s natural and cultural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. Fulfilling our mission and ensuring positive visitor experiences is the work of our 20,000 employees and thousands of volunteers, interns, fellows, and partners who are the heart of our agency. I want to acknowledge their accomplishments and thank them for their dedication.

Significant investments from the Great American Outdoors Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and recent emergency disaster supplemental appropriations have allowed the NPS to address critical needs in our national parks and enhance or recover the visitor experience. Yet, the NPS faces many of the same challenges and constraints that other federal agencies, cities, towns, organizations, and businesses face across the country. We rise to meet these challenges and work daily to sustain these remarkable places that the American people have entrusted to us. Indeed, many countries look to our leadership and to us as the model park system.

Responding to Road, Trail, & Facility Closures

Whether due to natural disasters, significant weather events, public safety, seasonal wildlife protection, or infrastructure improvements, certain areas in national parks may be closed out of necessity. Our goal is to reestablish access as soon as possible where feasible or provide alternatives where closures are long-term or permanent.

In years with heavy snowfall, mountain roads and facilities open later than they might in an average year. Deeper snowpacks provide needed drought relief but also require more time to clear. This past winter and spring, for example, the Tuolumne River basin in Yosemite National

Park received 250% more snow than average. Crews and equipment worked exceptionally hard this year to clear Tioga Road while maintaining safety in avalanche hazard areas. The North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park saw over 250 inches of snow this past winter and reopened to visitors in early June with water conservation measures in place while the park repaired a break to the water infrastructure.

Floods impact parks across the country every year. Notably, in Yellowstone National Park last year, record flooding events washed out portions of two major roadways, leaving the park headquarters and the park community of Mammoth Hot Springs isolated. The NPS and its partners worked quickly to ensure the safety of visitors, employees, and community residents, and to restore damaged roads, water and wastewater systems, power lines, and other critical park infrastructure. The park rapidly reopened areas when it was safe to do so and over 90% of the park was reopened just a couple weeks after the flood event. Thanks to the strong partnership with the Federal Highway Administration, the agencies were able to re-establish access for Yellowstone National Park visitors, employees, and gateway communities in under five months. It would not have been possible without the tremendous support from the Congressional delegations, governors, counties, communities, and other partners.

Increased winter snowpack and spring rain have improved conditions slightly at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Lake Mead National Recreation Area, but declining water levels due to climate change and over 20 years of ongoing drought have reshaped these parks' shorelines. As Lake Powell and Lake Mead continue to recede, extending launch ramps and other infrastructure becomes more difficult and more expensive due to the topography and projected decline in water levels. The NPS recognizes the important role that launch ramps and marinas play in the economies of gateway communities and the numerous businesses that operate in and around both parks. Our commitment to understanding the impacts of climate change on park resources, infrastructure, operations, and visitor experiences is central to ensuring the safe, responsible, and long-term use and enjoyment of all the parks have to offer.

We know one year of heavy snowpack alone will not sustain lake access into the future. To prepare for the possibility of continued rapid water level decline, Lake Mead National Recreation Area is preparing a Sustainable Low Water Access Plan, which is currently open for public comment. The NPS looks forward to the next phase of public and stakeholder feedback and engagement to develop a responsible and feasible plan to preserve both motorized and primitive recreational boating access to the lake.

Besides heavy snow and ice, flooding, and drought, events that can damage park resources and facilities and leave them inaccessible to visitors include hurricanes, landslides, rockfalls, structural fires, wildfires, and beach erosion. The NPS appreciates the support of Congress in providing recent emergency supplemental appropriations to recover from the consequences of these disasters, but notes that these funds do not support proactive investments in infrastructure hardening or resiliency at a portfolio scale.

The protection of natural and cultural resources is core to the NPS' legislative mandate. There are times when an area may be closed to visitor use to protect wildlife or culturally significant artifacts. In the spring, certain trails or rock-climbing routes may be closed to protect nesting

peregrine falcons, such as at Joshua Tree National Park, Zion National Park, and Acadia National Park. At national seashores, certain dunes and beach areas may be closed to protect piping plovers or sea turtles from disturbance during vulnerable nesting periods. These federally threatened and endangered species are an integral part of what makes these places special and national seashores provide critical habitat for their survival.

Closures or limited hours of visitor facilities due to staffing shortages is another access issue the NPS is working to address. Our existing staff is spread more thinly than in years past. Between FY 2011 and FY 2022, the total number of NPS full-time employees decreased by approximately 3,400 or 15%. Capacity requirements of the NPS have increased significantly as Congress has authorized new parks and programs, as well as expansions of existing parks. The NPS is grateful for the \$500 million available through FY 2030 that Congress provided in the Inflation Reduction Act to hire employees in the national park system; however, this will not fully or permanently restore lost capacity.

Other factors also complicate this issue, including how NPS pay, benefits, and work environment compares to that in the local area. The NPS typically tries to hire approximately 7,000 seasonal positions annually to fill critical roles across the National Park System during the heaviest periods of visitation. The NPS is committed to using all available hiring authorities and pursuing strategic workforce planning and recruiting to fill these and other positions. In many parks, housing availability or affordability in the local area challenges their ability to recruit or retain employees. The FY 2024 President's Budget Request for the NPS includes an increase of \$7.0 million, for a total of \$14.9 million, to support improving the condition or quantity of park housing units.

As we continue to welcome visitors to their national parks this summer and beyond, we strongly recommend they "Plan Like a Park Ranger" so that the only surprises are happy ones. A park visit begins with a trip to NPS.gov for ideas about where to go, what to see, and most important, to make sure that the areas visitors hope to see are open and accessible. Information about current conditions and timelines for facilities reopening can be found on each park's website and social media platforms. The NPS provides advance notice, when possible, of anticipated closures. We appreciate visitors' understanding and ask that they be prepared to adapt their plans, slow down on roadways, expect delays, and pack their patience.

Making Progress on Improving Facilities

When Americans visit their parks, they expect to find high-quality facilities which enable a safe and memorable experience. Many of the roads, trails, restrooms, water treatment systems, and visitor and operational facilities in national parks are aging, obsolete, and strained by underfunding and use they were not designed to support. We are grateful to Congress for passage of the Great American Outdoors Act which established the National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) to address the Department's deferred maintenance and repair backlog. The NPS is using this investment to accomplish much-needed asset maintenance, repairs, and replacement. Improved facilities will be more resilient, operate more efficiently, and better serve visitors. The NPS has prioritized 130 LRF projects that will improve the condition of roads, buildings, utility systems, and other assets in 176 parks located in 48

states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. While projects are underway, temporary closures will typically be required as we work to improve facilities for visitors.

Hot Springs National Park received \$16.7 million of LRF funding for roof repairs to the Buckstaff Bathhouse and structural and systems upgrades to the Maurice Bathhouse and the former Libbey Memorial Physical Medicine Center. These essential repairs include structural improvements and upgrades to electrical, plumbing, and fire suppression systems, which will provide employees and visitors with more accessible, safe, and energy-efficient facilities.

Several miles of the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park will undergo rehabilitation as part of a \$17.1 million LRF project. Work will include replacement of the current multi-span McDonald Creek Bridge with a clear-span bridge. The project also entails curve widening, milling, and repaving of the road segment, along with installing conduit for future fiber lines.

At the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, water system improvements are part of a planned \$180.1 million LRF project. The improvements would address frequent failures with extended periods of service outages and would result in a reliable water system to meet supply needs at the North Rim and in the cross-canyon corridor for a projected lifespan of up to 75 years. Feedback received during the public comment period will be used to refine the project proposal.

Tuolumne Meadows Campground in Yosemite National Park will receive a major overhaul with \$26.1 million in LRF funding. The project will rehabilitate and modernize the park's largest campground, which hosts more than 150,000 campers annually and which was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The work will enhance the visitor experience, fix structures damaged from heavy snowfall, and repair aging, inefficient infrastructure.

At Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Site, a \$9.1 million LRF project will address repair work, structural concerns, code deficiencies, and deterioration of historic features in the Texas White House and the surrounding site. The work will ensure the long-term integrity of a critical park resource and allow it to be reopened to the public. The nearby communications building will be repurposed to provide essential restroom facilities and expand visitor amenities.

The much-needed funding infusion from the LRF program has helped us make meaningful progress in improving the condition of high-priority assets, yet there remains an ongoing need for long-term maintenance, modernization, renewal, strategic evaluation of low-priority assets, and operations support. We recognize, even with this significant investment, the NPS has more assets than staff and funding to adequately operate and maintain them.

The impact of appropriations for park facilities is measured in decades; therefore, it is critical that we adopt a sustainable mindset and business model that considers fiscal and staffing limitations for resource allocation to ensure the preservation and accessibility of our cherished national parks. That includes making strategic choices like decommissioning, closing, or removing lower priority structures. This will allow us to allocate funds and staff to protect

priority resources while creating meaningful experiences for visitors that will be enjoyed by future generations.

We will continue to seek funding through line item construction, Federal Highways, and other programs, to ensure facilities, including roads, trails, and natural and cultural resources are properly maintained and improved to meet code compliance for safety, sustainability, and accessibility for people with disabilities, and to meet current and future capacity needs.

The President's budget request for the NPS for FY 2024 is \$3.8 billion. This request makes bold investments essential for the NPS's continued mission success in its second century while remaining committed to the daily mission of ensuring that the American public continues to have an enriching experience at each site.

Addressing High Visitation and Enhancing the Visitor Experience

Incidental road, trail, and facility closures in individual national parks have not resulted in a significant reduction in total visitation across the national park system. In FY 2022, the NPS received 312 million recreation visits, up 15 million visits (5%) from FY 2021, which is nearly at pre-pandemic levels. Visitors may experience congestion at popular parks and at attraction hotspots and where entries and exits are limited. Crowding can also be felt at the most popular scenic viewpoints that are within one-quarter mile of a parking lot.

For some parks, providing great experiences has become more challenging due to increases in the number of people visiting, changes to when and how visitors arrive, and evolving visitor needs and expectations, including how visitors want to engage in the parks. Some parks are finding the level of visitor demand to be significantly outpacing their ability to accommodate, resulting in the need to explore new management strategies. Park facilities and staffing levels are challenged to keep pace with this changing visitation, impacting the quality of the visitor experience, health and safety, and resource protection. These visitation changes are also felt outside park boundaries in adjacent lands, waters, and communities.

The NPS is employing a range of park-specific strategies to provide a welcoming and enjoyable environment while ensuring the protection of nationally significant resources. In addition to using pilot projects and flexible planning tools to test ideas, we are conducting robust public and stakeholder engagement before committing to long-term implementation. Over the next few months, our expanded social science research will also provide us with visitor information at the park and bureau levels for visitor experience planning. The data will also enable the NPS to facilitate strategies to provide for more inclusive, diverse, and equitable visitation.

Some strategies for managing use have been employed for decades. The NPS has long managed access in backcountry areas and wilderness, for example, by issuing trailhead and overnight permits. Permit systems for remote backcountry locations have helped preserve the qualities of solitude and minimize resource impacts.

To address vehicular congestion, the NPS has invested in multimodal transportation options such as shuttles and multi-use paths where biking and walking are encouraged. We also strategically

support the use of ride-hailing applications and micromobility options such as scooters, e-bikes, and bike-share where appropriate.

Other managed access strategies, such as reservation and timed entry systems, are now in place or have been piloted at several parks, with each addressing specific park-level issues. Congestion can result in gridlock, visitor conflicts, crowding, safety issues, resource damage, and, of particular concern, delays in emergency response. Managed access strategies are intended to address the amount, type, and timing of access to an area to ensure desired conditions are met for high-quality visitor experiences and resource protection. For example, reservation systems spread visitation throughout the day, reduce queuing at entrance stations and parking lots, and avoid the cascading impacts on resource conditions, operational capacity, and visitor experience. These systems allow visitors to better plan and have more enjoyable experiences, while often having the added benefit of expanding the economic benefits of parks to more local businesses and area attractions that have historically seen less use.

Comprehensive, reliable, and accessible traveler information plays an important role in enhancing recreational access to parks. The NPS is working on several technological advances that will improve the visitor experience in parks through enhanced trip-planning tools. In FY 2023 and FY 2024, the NPS Transportation Planning Program and Federal Highways Administration Innovation and Research Council have funded a \$500,000 research project to develop a recreational travel forecasting tool to be applied across a range of parks to assist visitors in advanced trip planning by informing them of where and when congestion occurs. Pilot tool development will occur at approximately 10 different parks of varying types. Meanwhile, expansion of wireless service coverage along transportation corridors would ensure visitors have increased access to these travel tools.

Recreation.gov provides reservation and trip planning capabilities and features more than 110,000 individual sites and activities across 4,000 recreation areas. The platform offers expanded features to improve the customer experience through visitor mapping and trip planning tools that allow visitors to discover locations and activities new to them, especially when their chosen sites are already reserved. The Recreation.gov mobile app offers visitors the convenience of making and managing reservations on the go.

The NPS mobile app is another helpful tool visitors to national parks can use to assist them in their trip planning. The app ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. It currently offers interactive maps, tours, accessibility information, and more. The app is built to be used even in remote parks, where internet access may be limited by allowing visitors to download information to their phones in advance.

The NPS wants visitors to have a high-quality experience everywhere they go in the National Park System. National parks are working to offer new ways for people to receive timely information to better plan and enjoy their trips. We cannot meet these challenges alone. The NPS is committed to collaborating with local communities, businesses, and nonprofit partners to find solutions that improve the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, address crowding and congestion in a thoughtful way, and maintain the tremendous range of benefits that national parks provide. Given the iconic and finite nature of these highly valued places, along with the

complexity of providing inclusive and high-quality visitor opportunities, creativity, active collaboration, and shared responsibility will be essential for ensuring sustainable and effective strategies.

Enjoyment of our parks and park resources by Americans and international visitors is a fundamental purpose of all national parks. We may face many challenges, but the NPS is committed to finding innovative solutions, and making responsible choices to ensure future generations can enjoy and be inspired by the parks entrusted to our care. We appreciate your ongoing support as we endeavor to achieve these goals.

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.