

Statement of John Garder
Senior Director of Budget and Appropriations, National Parks Conservation Association
For the Joint Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and the Subcommittee on Federal Lands
January 10th Hearing, National Park Service's Deferred Maintenance Backlog: Perspectives from the
Government Accountability Office and the Inspector General

Chairmen Tiffany and Gosar, Ranking Members Neguse and Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am John Garder, Senior Director for Budget and Appropriations for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading national, independent voice for protecting and enhancing America's National Park System for present and future generations. We appreciate the opportunity to submit for the hearing record our views and observations on the National Park Service's (NPS) implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and recent reports examining this topic.

We were fortunate to work with members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to pursue passage of GAOA, which was an historic achievement. Since former President Donald Trump signed it into law in August 2020, the NPS and other agencies have made significant progress responsibly investing energy receipts in hundreds of critically needed repair projects across the country, including in many congressional districts represented by members of these subcommittees. These investments are allowing NPS and other agencies to make significant progress with their deferred maintenance backlogs—progress that would not be taking place were it not for GAOA.

The law's success is already visible in numerous parks and other public lands and will increasingly be noticeable to visitors in the ensuing months and years as projects move from planning, design and procurement to construction and completion. As these projects are completed, we will see a significant amount of deferred maintenance taken off the books.

The record of success in national parks throughout the country is impressive. Between FY21 and FY23, GAOA's National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) has allowed NPS to program nearly \$5 billion to improve more than 2,200 assets including water and electric systems, roads and campgrounds—some with critical life and safety issues. NPCA analyzed the list of LRF projects and found that over 200 congressional districts, nearly all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and multiple U.S. territories are benefiting from projects.

These projects are enhancing visitors' safety and experiences and the ability of staff to perform needed duties to meet NPS' mission to protect resources and serve visitors. These successes have come despite several challenges including those outlined in the recently released Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, *Agencies Generally Followed Leading Practices in Selections but Faced Challenges*—in particular the rising cost of labor and materials, supply constraints and severe weather, all of which spread the LRF's dollars more thinly.

It is notable that in concluding its congressionally mandated study, the GAO had no recommendations for NPS to improve its work to prioritize and process projects. Equally significantly, neither the GAO nor the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Inspector General (IG) report found any waste, fraud, abuse or other problems with the projects and the many phases of execution required to bring them from infancy to completion. Instead, as the GAO affirms, we are seeing a solid record of success repairing our parks

and other public lands, directing long-overdue dollars to reconstruction and repairs with remarkably little overhead—an average of less than 3% across projects within DOI.

Projects at or near completion improving the visitor experience include at Grand Teton National Park, where roads have been repaved, a bridge has been reconstructed, and parking areas and the southern entrance station have been improved. Additionally at Grand Teton, NPS has been replacing the Colter Bay wastewater main lift station and replacing the roof and addressing safety needs at its headquarters. At other parks, projects at or near completion include the rehabilitation of roads at Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah National Parks, which together accommodate millions of visitors annually who drive on these roads and invest in local economies along the way.

Our national parks have gone more than fifty years without the robust investment that is needed to maintain more than 75,000 assets, a collection second only to the Department of Defense in its magnitude. NPS desperately needed the LRF investment because it has gone for so long without a robust investment in its aging and degraded infrastructure while at the same time, it has been struggling with a significant operational shortfall.

Appropriated operations increases over the decade have been insufficient to provide for NPS' significant fixed costs that include staff cost of living adjustments, benefits and insurance, leading to an erosion of staffing levels. Understaffing and other operational shortfalls have been exacerbated by visitation increases that spread staff even thinner as they tackle multiple collateral duties. Between 2012 and 2022, NPS lost 13% of its staff while accommodating a 10% increase in visitation. Between this operational shortfall and insufficient annual investments in line-item construction and park transportation infrastructure, NPS has been unable to keep up with the growth of the deferred maintenance and repairs backlog. Notably, the FY24 House Interior and Environment appropriations bill would significantly worsen this problem and should be rejected. NPS estimates that “more than one billion dollars is needed annually for preventative and recurring maintenance and component renewal activities just to keep the portfolio of assets at a steady state.”

There are numerous repair and reconstruction projects that would have waited indefinitely to be addressed were it not for the LRF. For example, the maintenance facility at Acadia National Park that was built in 1963 was declared structurally unsound over a decade ago and it was not until GAOA that the park was able to repair it. This project was critically needed to ensure the functional operation of this park that accommodates nearly four million visitors annually who collectively spend nearly a half billion dollars, supporting almost 7,000 jobs in gateway communities.

The GAO's recent report outlines agency successes despite several challenges. Firstly, it shows that NPS and the other LRF-funded agencies have been responsibly following standard procedures for estimating deferred maintenance and repairs and have been using strategic and responsible criteria in estimating and addressing this maintenance. It also demonstrates that the LRF funding infusion provided additional motivation to agencies to refine their methods and establish more consistent criteria for estimating deferred maintenance. It observes that all five agencies funded by the LRF have been following leading practices recognized as effective strategies for addressing deferred maintenance, according to the six relevant criteria the GAO examined.

Furthermore, the GAO report shows that the infusion of LRF funding allowed NPS and other agencies to address repair projects that could not have been funded with other funding sources such as

appropriations. Clearly, the infusion of LRF funding and associated efforts by the agencies to more accurately, reliably and transparently estimate their backlogs has given lawmakers and the public a more complete understanding of the breadth of the federal public lands deferred maintenance backlog. The report found that all five agencies established clear objectives, performance goals, baselines for outcomes, and performance measures. This included maximizing return on LRF investments and minimizing overhead costs. Another major finding was that all the agencies sought to take as much deferred maintenance off the books as they could and considered factors including public safety, the importance of the asset to the agency's mission, the level of visitation (especially in the first year of funding), the cost and scope of the project, and the speed with which they could implement the project.

The GAO report reflects NPS' improved methodology for estimating its backlog, a need that was recognized and mandated only months after GAOA's passage in November 2020. At that juncture, former DOI Secretary David Bernhardt pointed to the flaws in NPS' former system of estimating the backlog based on work orders and that NPS would need to initiate "a comprehensive review and reform of the systems and processes used to manage its properties, including a streamlined condition-assessment methodology that better conforms to generally accepted practices." In April 2023, NPS Director Chuck Sams wrote the IG to explain that NPS was still in the process of updating its methodology for calculating deferred maintenance, yet the IG performed its review rather than waiting until NPS made additional progress with revising its system for calculating deferred maintenance and prioritizing projects. It is notable that the more recent GAO report did not find issues with NPS' methodology; on the contrary and as outlined above, the agency found NPS' work to be in line with industry standards. NPS has clearly made its transition to updated methodology successfully.

In our testimony to the Federal Lands subcommittee in April 2023 in advance of its NPS deferred maintenance hearing, we made several observations that are summarized much more briefly below. For greater detail on these observations, we encourage members of the committee to review that testimony.

NPS has not received a robust investment in over fifty years in its assets despite their considerable age, increased visitation creating more wear and tear, and understaffing and underfunding that have undermined maintenance capacity. The bipartisan creation of the LRF has been successfully applied across the country in dozens of congressional districts that are urban and rural, with projects both large and small. The larger level of funding than has historically been provided has been able to fund large projects such as roads, bridges, and water systems. Meanwhile, [Maintenance Action Teams](#) (MATs) have performed hundreds of smaller projects throughout the country, many to preserve historic resources. Among the many resources that DOI has been posting is a [map of completed MATs projects](#).

Over the last three years, NPS has engaged in a transparent process that has involved numerous [online databases](#), [fact sheets](#), [state by state fact sheets](#) and [other information](#) relevant to LRF execution. They have engaged in multiple briefings for stakeholders and to congressional committees including the House Natural Resources Committee. The LRF has also further enhanced NPS' economic benefits nationally and in communities throughout the country. According to NPS' most recent [Visitor Spending Effects report](#), "in 2022, 312 million park visitors spent an estimated \$23.9 billion in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service lands across the country. These expenditures supported a total of 378 thousand jobs, \$17.5 billion in labor income, \$29 billion in value added, and \$50.3 billion in economic output in the national economy." The LRF has additional benefits. By NPS' last estimate,

thousands of jobs are being created with more than \$6 billion in benefits to the national economy. Those benefits will continue, showing that the LRF is not only restoring our historic and cultural heritage and ensuring the quality of the visiting experience, but also creating and supporting jobs throughout our nation.

Below is a sample of National Park Service news and promotion of projects, from social media to press releases to television news:

[Cuyahoga tow path](#)

[Lincoln Birthplace restoration](#)

[Craters of the Moon, Hagerman Fossil Beds and Minidoka facilities repaired](#)

[Mammoth Cave's Echo River Spring Trail](#)

[Grand Teton roads and trailhead](#)

[Carver National Monument restoration work](#)

In conclusion:

National parks are getting repaired, and millions of visitors will benefit. The LRF is proving successful in states and congressional districts throughout the country in areas both urban and rural, with a mix of smaller, medium-size and larger projects that would have been difficult to fund with non-LRF appropriated and other funding sources. NPS and other agencies have evolved their methods to use transparent, responsible procedures and methods that follow standard business practices. While the DOI IG report did not reflect these methods, the more recent GAO report demonstrated the responsible and effective use of these funds despite challenges including the eroding power of construction dollars. There has been no indication of shortcomings in project execution. To the contrary, the effective use of these funds to repair and reconstruct facilities demonstrates the power of this bipartisan achievement.

Because agency backlog lists show significant continuing needs, NPCA again calls on this committee and the Congress at large to introduce and pass legislation extending the LRF's funding at current levels for an additional five years. We remain available to answer questions or provide additional information supporting this call to action. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Please see [our website](#) at npca.org to learn more about the successful Great American Outdoors Act projects, including [LRF success stories](#).