

**Statement of Kristen Brengel,
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Before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
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Chairman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of 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 provide our views regarding the National Park Service (NPS) FY21 budget and funding and related issues facing our national parks this year.

We recognize that the subcommittee's allocation has been limited, so in this context NPCA and our partners in the National Parks Second Century Action Coalition commend and appreciate the efforts you have made to increase NPS funding over the last seven years. These funds have supported staffing to protect and interpret resources, steward our parks and ensure a quality visiting experience. Our parks are unfortunately struggling to meet their mission, so we ask you to do your best to build on this support in FY21.

As members of the committee know, investing in our national parks does not just preserve our cultural and natural heritage, but is also a wise investment. National parks deliver robust economic returns, with \$10 in economic benefits for every dollar invested in the NPS. In 2018, visitors spent more than \$20 billion in gateway communities. The contribution of this spending to the national economy was 329,000 jobs and \$40.1 billion in economic output. The national economy is stimulated when the businesses and employees that benefit from visitor spending in turn purchase goods and services from others.

Top three FY21 Priorities: NPCA requests increased funding for the National Park Service with a focus on these accounts:

1. NPS Operations: Increase the account by \$94 million above FY20 to \$2.671 billion to address staffing challenges and other operational needs.
2. Construction: Restore this account to \$439 million, a \$50 million increase over FY20, which would help address repair projects within the deferred maintenance backlog.
3. National Park Partnerships: Increase the Centennial Challenge by \$8 million over FY20 to \$23 million, to leverage nonfederal dollars to improve the visiting experience in parks across the country.

The Interior 302(b) allocation: We regret that the subcommittee's allocation has been significantly limited by the Budget Control Act of 2011, and we know that this year the cap adjustment is relatively modest, so will limit your ability to invest in the many priorities under your jurisdiction. We hope that the expiration of this problematic law will allow the Interior subcommittee to receive the funds it needs in the years ahead to bolster our parks; we will do our best to convey to congressional leadership and the full committee the importance of a more substantial allocation for this subcommittee.

Operation of the National Park System: We recognize the increases you have provided for park operations over the years but we are dismayed that more is needed and operating our national parks will continue to be a struggle for superintendents without a more robust investment in FY21 and the

years ahead. As this subcommittee recognized in its FY20 bill, staffing remains one of the largest challenges facing park superintendents who are struggling to operate their parks at flat or modestly increased budgets that are insufficient to prevent the erosion of personnel. Between 2011 and 2018, park visitation increased by 11% but staffing was reduced by 11%; we expect finalized 2019 staffing numbers to be lower.

The 3% increase for park operations in FY20 will be helpful, and we know that a more sustained investment is needed, in part because of the significant impact of inflation and uncontrollable fixed costs. For example, one superintendent reported to us that while they were not yet sure of what their base budget would ultimately be in FY20, they must adjust for a 3.1% salary increase and 2.5% benefits increase, which is fantastic for employees but is among the challenging fixed costs when base budgets do not get significant increases.

We also respectfully request broad investments in park operations to address the many operating needs beyond maintenance. While the maintenance backlog is one of our highest funding priorities, we do not want a focus on the backlog to cause other needed work to fall further behind. Interpretation and education need updating, while cultural resource experts, wildlife biologists, law enforcement and other personnel needs continue to lag. We appreciate that appropriators were able to increase park operations by \$94 million in FY16, so we ask for this same increase next fiscal year.

Construction/ deferred maintenance backlog: NPCA requests a \$50 million increase for this account in FY21, which is the average increase appropriators provided over the last five fiscal years. We appreciate the years of investment in the park service deferred maintenance backlog through both the repair and rehabilitation subaccount within Operations and the construction account. Recent investments in line-item construction projects are helping meet needs at the Arlington Memorial Bridge and the potable water system at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Funding in FY20 will address safety and stability issues at the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, preserve the Carver Museum at the Tuskegee Institute National Historical Site, improve the visitor center at Curecanti National Recreation Area, and much more. Projects in need of funding in FY21 include repairing the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse at Cape Hatteras National Seashore, replacing obsolete employee housing at Pipe Spring National Monument, and replacing obsolete trailers with multiplex housing at Yellowstone National Park.

For your information, we are also urging the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development subcommittee to fund the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects Program at the fully authorized \$100 million. The program funds large transportation infrastructure projects for parks and other federal lands, and tribal lands. Half of the nearly \$12 billion NPS backlog is comprised of transportation projects.

Centennial Challenge: We commend this subcommittee for its continued support for this important program that provides federal funds to match private and philanthropic funds for projects to improve the visitor experience. Oftentimes, the federal investment leverages more than a one-to-one match in private dollars. Recent signature projects include addressing deferred maintenance at the historic Hammond-Cranz farm in Cuyahoga Valley National Park and supporting Native American recreational programming at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Many more philanthropic opportunities await, so we hope the subcommittee can increase funding for this successful program that enjoys strong bipartisan support.

While our request for FY21 is focused on these accounts, there are many more areas of park funding that concern us.

The 2018-2019 government shutdown and fee dollars: We were grateful that members of this subcommittee and its Senate counterparts were among many members of Congress who were deeply concerned about keeping parks open during the most recent shutdown. The shutdown was extremely damaging for national parks, their visitors, partner groups, park staff and businesses. It was made worse than recent shutdowns not only because of its extended duration, but also because of the administration's decision to use fee dollars to keep some parks open. This approach proved to be irresponsible, reckless, and illegal. Parks experienced vandalism, looting, damage to fragile natural resources, threats to wildlife and visitor safety and much more. We hope the Government Accountability Office finding that the Department of the Interior (DOI) acted illegally with this approach will prevent this from happening again. However, there is no indication the administration will respect the finding, so we urge this subcommittee to provide the oversight necessary to prevent this misuse of fees. As you know, the shutdown was not the only instance of the administration inappropriately using fee accounts as its slush fund. The appropriations process is an appropriate opportunity to exercise this needed oversight, so we ask you to consider bill language clarifying the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) funding: National parks provide habitat for over 600 threatened and endangered species listed under ESA. Park managers work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to ensure these species are on the path to recovery. Unfortunately, ESA programs have been inadequately funded for years, leading to delays in listing and insufficient investments in species recovery. We appreciate the committee's efforts to increase FY20 funding for the suite of ESA programs within USFWS, including recovery initiatives, listing, and planning and consultation, and were disappointed to see the final bill did not match the House numbers. We urge the committee to continue to make significant investments in the protection and recovery of our most vulnerable species, including fish, wildlife and plants in our national parks.

Ensuring watershed health: The health and long-term protection of our national parks is also contingent on continuing strong investments in critical watershed protection and restoration programs. NPCA strongly supports Environmental Protection Agency and USFWS programs that restore watersheds essential to the wetlands, rivers, streams, and bays that flow in and around our parks. We applaud the committee for its past commitment and urge its continued support for the efforts of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the Chesapeake Bay Program, Delaware River Restoration Program and the South Florida Program.

National Heritage Areas (NHAs): NPCA commends the \$1.6 million funding increase the FY20 budget provided for the NHA program. The increase covered the costs associated with standing up the six new NHAs designated by Congress with passage of the John S. Dingell Conservation Act in March 2019. Looking to the FY21 budget, NPCA requests the funding level for the NHA program be set at \$32 million, which will allow these highly effective public-private partnerships to adequately serve the needs of their constituents and partners.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): Development within park lands remains a significant threat, so we commend this subcommittee's increase for the federal LWCF program in FY20. This will protect critical land parcels at Cumberland Island National Seashore, Petersburg National Battlefield, Theodore Roosevelt National Park and other treasured places. We hope the committee can at a minimum maintain this level of funding in FY21.

Dedicated maintenance backlog and LWCF funding: We continue to urge Congress to recognize that a more realistic long-term solution is needed to address the maintenance backlog. We respectfully ask members of this subcommittee to build on their work to address this challenge by urging leadership to bring to the floor the Restore Our Parks and Public Lands Act (H.R. 1225). We fully support this bill being brought to the floor along with the Land and Water Conservation Fund Permanent Funding Act, H.R. 3195. Both are needed to better protect and preserve our parks and provide visitors with inspiring experiences.

The southern border wall and border enforcement: We are alarmed by the construction of the border wall, which threatens communities and wildlife across the southern border region. New border wall is currently under construction at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona using funding from the Department of Defense drug interdiction funding. The damage to the natural and cultural landscape at Organ Pipe is already significant and could well be irreversible. We were deeply disappointed the FY20 bill did nothing to stop this construction or mitigate the damage and that Congress failed to prevent similar projects from moving forward at public lands across the border region. We urge the FY21 appropriations process put a stop to this damaging construction project. NPCA is also concerned the administration will transfer funding from park operations to border enforcement efforts, further depleting needed funds from parks around the system without congressional guidance or direction.

Reprogramming language and DOI reorganization: NPCA remains concerned with the administration's initiative to reorganize DOI and we commend the committee's attention to this issue. We do not want reorganization to undermine NPS' conservation-driven work or the morale of NPS personnel, so your continuing oversight is appreciated. We were very grateful that the FY20 bill did not provide any funding increases though disappointed that the continuation of prior year funding has allowed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to continue moving staff west. This action threatens to gut the agency, undermine staff morale, reduce staff expertise and lead to more leasing and other decisions on BLM lands that impact resource protection in adjacent parks. We commend the inclusion of reprogramming language in the final FY21 bill and the report language directing monthly updates. We hope this will reduce the potential harm of the reorganization and ask that you share information gleaned through these reports with the public, as a major challenge with the reorganization has been the administration's lack of transparency.

Policy riders and amendments: We continue to oppose environmentally damaging riders on appropriations bills so we were grateful the final FY20 bill was largely free of these riders. However, we are disappointed that legacy riders were included in the FY20 bill that undermine efforts to address climate change. We ask that the FY21 bill be free of new riders and remove these harmful legacy riders.

In conclusion: We recognize the subcommittee's constrained allocation, and thus commend the recent funding increases for NPS and commitment to our parks' conservation and preservation mission. We respectfully request the best funding level possible for NPS in FY21 to help the agency recover from underfunding. Further, we appreciate your work to prevent environmentally-damaging policy riders. We also appreciate your oversight over the administration's use of fees and its reorganization and hope that the FY21 bill can continue this oversight.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.