

Homestead Testimony – May 22, 2019

Thank you Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss my bill, H.R. 1472, to rename the Homestead National Monument of America, located in Beatrice, Nebraska, as the Homestead National Historical Park.

This legislation is cosponsored by both my Nebraska colleagues, Don Bacon and Jeff Fortenberry, and has received 15 letters of support from local stakeholders.

The Homestead Act of 1862, signed into law by President Lincoln, helped shape the American West. It allowed U.S. citizens to earn ownership of a portion of the vast public lands, owned by the federal government, across the western United States. Ultimately the Federal Government granted titles to 10 percent of the land in the US through this program. It also gave millions the chance to make a new life for themselves, their families, and for future generations.

In order to claim a 160 acre parcel of land under the Homestead Act, a homesteader was required to be at least 21 years old or the head of a household, build a home on the land, improve and farm the land for five years, and pay an \$18 dollar filing fee. The Homestead Act remained in place through 1976, with provisions allowing for homesteading in Alaska through 1986.

In the Third District of Nebraska, we are very proud the very first claim under the Homestead Act was made by a man named Daniel Freeman, near Beatrice, Nebraska. To memorialize this

milestone, as well as the 1.6 million other claims which built the American west, the Homestead National Monument of America was established. The problem with referring to this site as a monument is that it is not a single, static monument – like a statue or obelisk, or even a natural feature like Scottsbluff National Monument in my hometown of Gering, Nebraska - but an extensive park celebrating these pioneers.

Homestead National Monument consists of a heritage museum, the Freeman school, a tall grass prairie, hiking trails, a forest, farming demonstrations, and much more. Referring to this site as a historical park instead of a monument would far more clearly describe the opportunities to take in this living history site. In fact, according to the Friends of Homestead National Monument of America, 89 percent of first-time visitors to the facility were confused by the name.

Recently, a number of National Park Service facilities such as the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, the Gateway Arch National Park, and Pinnacles National Park have received new names which more accurately reflect the purpose and content of the facilities to address similar concerns.

On behalf of the people of Nebraska, and particularly the citizens of Beatrice and Gage County, Nebraska, I appreciate the opportunity to advocate in support of this proposal today. We have opportunity to ensure all Americans understand opportunities available to them in south central Nebraska, and I appreciate your interest.

Thank you Chairwoman Haaland.