

STATEMENT OF CAMERON SHOLLY, SUPERINTENDENT, YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AT AN OVERSIGHT FIELD HEARING TO EXAMINE CHALLENGES IN GATEWAY COMMUNITIES OF NATIONAL PARKS.

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on the subject of challenges in gateway communities of national parks. The Department of the Interior appreciates the subcommittee's recognition of the importance of the relationship between national parks and its adjacent communities and the issues that they face together. The Department is also grateful for your cosponsorship of S. 3172, the Restore Our Parks Act, which we believe will have a very positive effect not only for parks but also for the communities adjacent to parks.

The National Park Service (NPS) manages a remarkable collection of places that represent some of the very best of America -- iconic destinations that attract hundreds of millions of visitors each year, from across the country and around the globe. The communities adjacent to parks, where visitors find hospitality services and recreational activities beyond those available within the parks, are essential to visitor access and exceptional park experiences. Often, gateway communities offer convenient locations to purchase goods and services and housing for NPS employees. These communities also benefit economically from park visitors who pass through them. The NPS understands the interdependency between parks and gateway communities and highly values its relationships with these communities. We strive to be good neighbors and partners to them. In fact, Secretary Zinke recently announced an historic 20-year mineral withdrawal just north of Yellowstone National Park, recognizing, with Agriculture Secretary Purdue, the importance of preserving Yellowstone and the surrounding community's recreation, tourism, and outdoor culture.

The economic strength of gateway communities is dependent on park visitation. In 2017, the 417 units of the National Park System received an estimated 331 million visits. Park visitors spent an estimated \$18.2 billion in local gateway regions and helped generate hundreds of thousands of jobs. Sixty-one of the 385 parks that track visitation set a new record, and that increased visitation is reflected in the vitality of gateway communities across the country, and particularly around the more iconic parks such as Yellowstone National Park.

The increased visitation we have experienced at national parks has caused enormous wear and tear on park facilities. Facing a deferred maintenance backlog of \$11.6 billion across the National Park System, Secretary Zinke has made it his highest legislative priority to establish a dedicated fund that will use \$6.5 billion generated from Federal energy revenue over the next five years to pay for the repair and restoration of our national parks. S. 3172, which was recently approved by the full Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, would establish that fund, launching an intensive rebuilding of park infrastructure, which will better accommodate the growing number of visitors. Improving the visitor experience and access to our parks will likely mean increasing visitation even more than it has increased already, and that will lead to greater impacts on, and opportunities for, gateway communities.

At Yellowstone, visitation was relatively consistent from about 1990 through 2009, averaging just under three million visitors per year. The average for 2015 through 2017 jumped about 40 percent higher than the previous levels. Those 4.1 million visitors in 2017 spent an estimated \$499 million in local communities, which supported more than seven thousand jobs in the area and had a cumulative benefit to the local economy of approximately \$630 million.

Along with the economic growth generated by increases in visitation, we have seen increased impacts. Vehicle counts at entry points signal increased traffic in gateway communities. Among the five entrances to Yellowstone, the vehicle traffic counts have increased at the north and west entrances about 60 percent. That translates to almost 137,000 and 243,000 more vehicles per year, respectively, than during the period of 1990 to 2009. The northeast counts near Cooke City and Silvergate are up 37 percent, and the east entrance counts from Cody are up almost 50 percent.

Gardiner is unique among Yellowstone's five gateway communities in that a large portion of the park's year-round staff lives just up the road in Mammoth. Although Gardiner and Mammoth are separated by five miles and a state line, they essentially function as one community. Park employees buy their groceries at the Gardiner Market, eat and drink in Gardiner establishments, and send their children to the Gardiner School. Gardiner community members who do not work in the park also take advantage of services in Mammoth. The only daycare and pre-school in the community are both located in Mammoth, and are available to both park employees and community members; the children of non-NPS employees typically comprise about a third of the classes each year. The only medical clinic in the immediate area is also located in Mammoth.

The NPS has enjoyed many successes in partnership with the community of Gardiner. In 2016, we celebrated together the NPS Centennial and the completion of the Gardiner Gateway Project. This project was a great example of our communities working together to accomplish mutually beneficial goals such as improving traffic flow and parking options; enhancing vehicular and pedestrian safety; installing sidewalks, new restrooms, signage, and lighting to protect night skies. We collectively restored the area around the historic Roosevelt Arch and created a beautiful shared space for events in Arch Park. The NPS held its national Centennial celebration in Arch Park, with a ceremony that included the governors of both Montana and Wyoming, the NPS Director, and the Secretary of the Interior. Since then, Arch Park has hosted events ranging from naturalization ceremonies to a BBQ fundraiser for the pre-school, demonstrating the value of these types of projects to both the NPS and the local community.

As the park and community succeed together, we also face the same challenges as well. Affordable housing in this community continues to be an issue. The childcare facility in Mammoth has experienced intermittent closures due to staffing shortages, because daycare workers struggle to find affordable local housing. Like the park, the Gardiner School has substantial infrastructure improvement needs. Combined, these challenges can make it difficult for families, especially those with young children and working parents. This impacts Gardiner businesses, park concessions operations, and the NPS as they work to attract and retain employees.

The National Park Service continually strives to increase the public's access to our national treasures. However, as visitation continues to increase, so must our ability to collaborate together. Yellowstone, like other national parks, needs the perspective of its partners in gateway communities to address both the challenges and opportunities before us.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement and I am happy to answer any questions.