

**STATEMENT OF PEGGY O'DELL, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE  
SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL  
PARKS CONCERNING S. 225, A BILL TO AUTHORIZE A STUDY OF  
ALTERNATIVES FOR COMMEMORATING AND INTERPRETING THE ROLE OF  
THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NATIONAL PARKS.**

**April 23, 2013**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on S.225, to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of alternatives for commemorating and interpreting the role of the Buffalo Soldiers in the early years of the national parks, and for other purposes.

The Department supports S. 225. However, we feel that priority should be given to the 31 previously authorized studies for potential units of the National Park System, potential new National Heritage Areas, and potential additions to the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic River System that have not yet been transmitted to Congress.

S. 225 would authorize a study to determine the most effective ways to increase understanding and public awareness of the critical role that the Buffalo Soldiers, segregated units composed of African-American cavalymen, played in the early years of the national parks. It would evaluate the suitability and feasibility of a National Historic Trail along the routes between their post at the Presidio of San Francisco and the parks they protected, notably Yosemite and Sequoia. The study would also identify properties that could meet the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or designation as National Historic Landmarks. We estimate that this study will cost approximately \$400,000.

President Obama recognized the legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers in issuing a proclamation on March 25, 2013, designating the Charles Young home in Wilberforce, Ohio, as a national monument. The Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument is now the 401<sup>st</sup> unit of the National Park System. The Presidential proclamation that established this national monument authorizes the NPS to complete a management plan that would include interpreting the struggles and achievements of the Buffalo Soldiers in their service to the United States. We note that, if S. 225 is enacted, there will be overlap with the Presidential proclamation, as this bill directs the NPS to complete a study to increase understanding and public awareness of the critical role that the Buffalo Soldier played in the early years of the national parks. However, this bill goes beyond the direction in the Presidential Proclamation by additionally authorizing a study of the suitability and feasibility of a national historic trail and identification of National Register of Historic Places National Historic Landmarks properties related to the Buffalo Soldiers. If enacted, the NPS will coordinate the completion of the study and the management plan.

African-American 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Buffalo Soldiers were an important, yet little known, part of the history of some of our first national parks. These cavalry troops rode hundreds of miles from their post at the Presidio of San Francisco to Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks in order to patrol and protect them. The journey across the state took sixteen days of serious horseback

riding averaging over twenty miles a day. Once in the parks, they were assigned to patrol the backcountry, build roads and trails, put a halt to poaching, suppress fires, stop trespass grazing by large herds of unregulated cattle and sheep, and otherwise establish roles later assumed by National Park rangers.

The U.S. Army administered Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks from 1891 to 1914, when it was replaced by civilian management. The National Park Service (NPS) was not created until 1916, 25 years after these parks were established. Commanding officers became acting military superintendents for these national parks with two troops of approximately 60 cavalry men assigned to each. The troops essentially created a roving economy—infusing money into parks and local businesses—and thus their presence was generally welcomed. The presence of these soldiers as official stewards of park lands prior to the NPS's establishment brought a sense of law and order to the mountain wilderness.

Lesser known, however, is the participation of African-American troops of the 24th Infantry and 9th Cavalry, the Buffalo Soldiers, who protected both Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks in 1899, 1903, and 1904. These troops and their contributions should be recognized and honored, and this bill does just that.

The most notable Buffalo Soldier was Colonel Charles Young, who served as a captain in the cavalry commanding a segregated black company at the Presidio of San Francisco. Born in Kentucky during the Civil War, Charles Young had already set himself a course that took him to places where a black man was not often welcome. He was the first black to graduate from the white high school in Ripley, Ohio, and through competitive examination he won an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1884. He went on to graduate with his commission, only the third black man to do so. Colonel Young's story and leadership are emblematic of the experience of the Buffalo Soldiers during difficult and racially tense times. When the new military superintendent arrived in Sequoia National Park in the summer of 1903, he had already faced many challenges. Young and his troops arrived in Sequoia after a 16-day ride from the Presidio of San Francisco to find that one of their major assignments would be the extension of the wagon road. Hoping to break the sluggish pattern of previous military administrations, Young poured his considerable energies into the project. Young and his troops built as much road as the combined results of the three previous summers, as well as building a trail to the top of Mt. Whitney—the highest point in the contiguous United States.

The soldiers also protected the giant sequoias from illegal logging, wildlife from poaching, and the watershed and wilderness from unauthorized grazing by livestock. A difficult task under any circumstances, the intensity was undoubtedly compounded by societal prejudice common at the turn of the century. They also produced maps and assisted tourists in the area.

Although Colonel Charles Young only served one season as an acting superintendent of a national park, he and his men have not been forgotten. The energy and dignity they brought to this national park assignment left a strong imprint. The roads they built are still in use today, having served millions of park visitors for more than eighty years. The legacy they left extends far beyond Sequoia National Park, as they helped lay the foundation for the National Park

System, which continues to inspire and connect people of all backgrounds to public lands and natural treasures to this day.

In recent years the NPS has made an effort to chronicle the achievements of these men. In the Presidio of San Francisco, Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the Presidio Trust have developed an education program using the historic stables that the Buffalo Soldiers actually used to house their horses. In Yosemite National Park, a park ranger portrays one of the U.S. Army's Buffalo Soldiers as part of his interpretation of Yosemite's history. Sequoia National Park has a giant sequoia named for Colonel Young in honor of his lasting legacy in that park. These isolated, but important efforts to educate the public on the important role of the Buffalo Soldiers could be heightened by this consolidated study.

There is a growing concern that youth are becoming increasingly disconnected with wild places and our national heritage. Additionally, many people of color are not necessarily aware of national parks and the role their ancestors may have played in shaping the national park system. The NPS can help foster a stronger sense of awareness and knowledge about the critical roles of African-American Buffalo Soldiers in the protection and development of some of our nation's natural treasures. As the 2016 centennial of the NPS approaches, it is an especially appropriate time to conduct research and increase public awareness of the stewardship role the Buffalo Soldiers played in the early years of the national parks.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be glad to answer any questions that you or other members if the subcommittee may have.