



## U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources 2/22/2020 Field Hearing

Prepared remarks for West Virginia Tourism Commissioner Chelsea A. Ruby

Good morning, Senator Manchin, Senator Capito, it's an honor to be here today to talk about the proposed New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. I want to thank you for holding this hearing to talk about what is a tremendous opportunity for West Virginia. On behalf of Governor Justice, I want to begin by saying that the state of West Virginia strongly supports the creation of West Virginia's first national park and preserve.

The New River Gorge is one of West Virginia's most beautiful and iconic places, with its wild rapids, rugged mountains, and majestic views. It has enormous potential to grow as a tourist destination and to help lift the economy in this region and the state as a whole. Designating it a national park will generate a significant and immediate boost in tourism here. For many travelers, the national park designation is a kind of seal of approval, confirmation that a destination is one of our nation's great places, that it's someplace they need to see. The New River Gorge certainly deserves to be recognized as one of those places, and when it is, we expect that we'll see a double-digit increase in visitation right away. And that will translate into a major economic impact, with visitors rafting, dining, shopping, staying in hotels, hunting, fishing, and visiting other destinations around the state as part of their trip to the park.

West Virginia needs that economic growth. We're working hard to continue diversifying our state's economy, and tourism, more and more, is a key economic pillar for the state. West Virginia tourism is a \$4.6 billion industry. Growing that number has been a top priority for Governor Justice, and over the past two years, our tourism sector has grown 9.9%. Last year, we grew more than 50% faster than the national average. Tourism supports more than 45,000 West Virginia jobs and provides more than \$500 million in state and local tax revenue. Establishing this park will mean more jobs for West Virginians and more revenue for governments to provide needed services.

The West Virginia Tourism Office stands ready to launch a major marketing campaign to promote the park as soon as it is created. Governor Justice and our Legislature have invested significantly more resources in tourism marketing in recent years, and the state is well positioned to let the rest of America know about a new park. It would immediately become the centerpiece of our tourism advertising.

If the park is created, we also expect that new businesses will develop around it to offer more activities and lodging, and existing businesses will expand. The state is ready to support them, as well. Our Tourism Development Act offers tax credits for new or expanding tourism-related businesses. Thanks in part to the tax credit, we already have more than \$240 million in tourism development projects planned around the state. And we look



forward to seeing a constellation of new economic development emerging to surround and complement this park.

In sum, creating the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve will be transformative for this region and for the entire state. It's impossible to overstate what a positive difference this will make. If any site in the country is worthy of this recognition, it's the New River Gorge. Thank you, Senator Capito, for beginning this process in 2018, and thanks to both of you for sponsoring the current bill and for your support of the park and preserve. This is a wonderful chance to benefit our state and to bring this magnificent area the recognition it deserves.

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