

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING H.R. 359, TO ESTABLISH FORT SAN GERÓNIMO DEL BOQUERÓN IN PUERTO RICO AS AN AFFILIATED AREA OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

**MAY 15, 2024**

---

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 359, a bill to establish Fort San Gerónimo Del Boquerón in Puerto Rico as an affiliated area of the National Park System, and for other purposes.

The Department supports H.R. 359 with amendments. Designating this fort as an affiliated area would provide an appropriate way to assist in the protection and interpretation of an important resource associated with Spanish colonial history in Puerto Rico.

H.R. 359 would establish Fort San Gerónimo del Boquerón (Fort San Gerónimo) as an affiliated area of the National Park System. The bill would designate the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, which currently manages the fort, as the management entity for the affiliated area and authorize the Secretary of the Interior to provide technical assistance and enter into cooperative agreements with the management entity for the purpose of providing financial assistance for the marketing, marking, interpretation, and preservation of the affiliated area. As an affiliated area, Fort San Gerónimo would continue under non-federal ownership and management, but the management entity would be required to administer the site consistent with laws applicable to units of the National Park System.

For 500 years, San Juan, Puerto Rico, played a key role in the European powers' command of the Caribbean as a strategic access point to the Americas. A massive fortification system was built by Spanish military engineers between the 16th and 19th centuries to protect the city. Three of the forts that were part of this system are included in the San Juan National Historic Site (NHS), administered by the NPS. Fort San Gerónimo, also part of this system, is a small, two-level, stone masonry fort listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and is now partially submerged in the Condado Lagoon.

Fort San Gerónimo was the subject of a special resource study conducted by the NPS pursuant to Public Law 111-11, which directed the Secretary of the Interior to determine the national significance, suitability, and feasibility of including the fort and other related resources as part of San Juan NHS and to consider alternative methods and means for the protection and interpretation of the fort. The study examined the fort under both the criteria for a new unit and as an addition to the boundary of San Juan NHS. The study findings were transmitted to Congress in March 2020.

Fort San Gerónimo was found to meet the special resource study criteria for national significance and suitability for establishing the site as a new unit of the National Park System, but not feasibility. Among the numerous aspects of feasibility evaluated, the most prohibitive factor was the high cost of historic preservation treatment to repair and rehabilitate the fort, which is severely deteriorated and in poor condition. As a result of the negative feasibility findings, the need for direct NPS management was not evaluated in detail. The findings were similar when the NPS evaluated the fort specifically for inclusion in the boundary of San Juan NHS. However, the NPS recognizes that there is strong public support and a potential opportunity for enhancing the interpretation and preservation of Fort San Gerónimo. In cases such as this, where resources meet the criteria for national significance and suitability but do not meet other criteria for inclusion in the National Park System, an affiliated area designation may be appropriate. We believe that is the case here.

While the Department supports H.R. 359, we recommend making a technical amendment to section 3(g), providing for the development of a management plan, and deleting sections 3(h) and 3(i), which address private property protection and activities outside of the affiliated area, respectively, both of which we believe are unnecessary. We would be pleased to provide recommended amendments for these purposes.

Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.