



Opening Statement
Oversight Hearing on the National Park Service Backlog
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
April 17, 2018

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

We're here to examine a priority for members on both sides of the Committee—deferred maintenance and the operational needs of the National Park Service.

As the agency moves into its second century, the deferred maintenance backlog, which now stands at \$11.6 billion, is one of the most significant challenges to its ability to provide quality visitor experiences. Today we'll take a deeper dive into what that number means, how we got here, and what Congress, the Department of the Interior, and stakeholders can do to address it.

We can all relate to deferred maintenance in national parks—it's perhaps a little bit of what we might experience in our own homes, on obviously a much broader scale however. We all have a list of things that need patching or updating. Whether it's a leaky faucet, old carpet, a roof that is in pretty tough shape. But deferred maintenance I think we recognize is more than just that, because the problem has gone on for so long. It's now the sink that no longer works because of a failure in the plumbing line, the carpet that has worn through to the subfloor, and the roof with gaping holes.

Just about every state, and for that matter just about every park unit, is affected by the deferred maintenance backlog. At Denali National Park, which is one of the most highly visited parks in my state, several bridges and culverts on the park road have made the deferred maintenance list, as well as restrooms and wastewater lines in the front country. Obviously very problematic.

Don Striker who is our park superintendent out there, is doing the best job that he can to manage them. But Polychrome Pass, which most dangerous part of the road, is just now being studied, and is not on the list. I had an opportunity just last week to look at some pictures of the status and situation of that road, heavy snows and a subsidence underneath it. This is a safety issue, this is a situation that will require more than just patching. This is a situation that will eventually require a rerouting of the road—you just can't backfill with gravel and hope that everything's going to be okay.

For those who have not had an opportunity to be up there in Denali, this is a spectacular part of the park. But the road is not a lane-and-a-half, it's barely a lane, and when you're in a bus it seems like it's less than a lane—and the drop down is not quite a ninety degree angle, I think it was described as a seventy or an eighty. But, when you are on it, it's breathtaking, not because of the beauty but because you're holding your breath literally as you're going through this portion. So making sure that we address that is absolutely a priority.

I certainly enjoy our national parks, I know that everyone on the committee does, I've got my national park passport I'm trying to get filled up. In Alaska, we have about 60% of the National Park Service total acreage, just in my state alone. So we are all about working to protect and certainly welcome the contribution to our economy our parks bring. But we also need to recognize that we've got a multi-faceted problem here, and that it will take more than just federal dollars to resolve over the long-term.

One part of the answer is to be judicious around here, as we consider parks legislation. There have been times when it makes sense to add to the system or to designate new units, but this is not always the case. Nearly every time we create a new unit we are stretching the existing operations budget that much farther. In most cases, there are no additional dedicated funds for these units. And that only compounds the deferred maintenance backlog we are trying to resolve.

We can also build on the steps we've already taken. We dedicated \$50 million from helium sales back in 2013. We've increased funding for the Volunteers in Parks Program and authorized donor recognition in parks. In 2016, we passed the Centennial Act, which established the Challenge Fund to finance signature projects and programs, as well as an endowment for the National Park Foundation, which promotes public-private philanthropy. And just last month, my section of the Omnibus we included \$180 million for construction and deferred maintenance, this was the largest-ever percentage increase in an annual appropriations bill, and we know that money will be well spent.

In addition to the work that Congress has done, this administration has been very clear, since Secretary Zinke's confirmation hearing, that reducing the deferred maintenance backlog is a top priority, as it should be.

The administration has put forth a legislative proposal to address the backlog, and then last week the National Park Service announced a fee update. There had been one previously that generated a lot of concern and consternation, the Park Service took the public comment to heart, and so what we have in front of us now is a proposed increase of \$5 per vehicle on average. Again, I think that was more responsive to public comment. And while fee hikes are never ideal, it is my understanding that all of the revenue from this increase will be used to address deferred maintenance needs in our parks, and I think that's a good thing.

As part of our conversation today, we will talk more about other potential revenue sources for deferred maintenance in parks, like philanthropic donations and public-private partnerships. We will talk about the need for a strategy to better prioritize routine and cyclic maintenance to prevent projects from becoming deferred maintenance in the first place. And then in the weeks ahead, we will come back and hold a legislative hearing, likely at the subcommittee level, Senator Daines I believe that you are Chairman of that subcommittee, and we have bills from members of this committee, both Senator Portman and Senator Alexander have bipartisan bills that are focused on these very important areas.

For today, we are here to conduct oversight—to learn, to understand, and to raise this as a priority for action this year. So I welcome all of our witnesses, I especially welcome Ms. Leonard, who leads the Alaska Travel Industry Association, you've come a long way this morning, we appreciate you being here. But to all of you, thank you for your contributions this morning

I'll now turn to Senator Cantwell for her opening statement.

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