

**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 S. 2018, A BILL TO REQUIRE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONDUCT AN ASSESSMENT TO IDENTIFY LOCATIONS IN NATIONAL PARKS IN WHICH THERE IS THE GREATEST NEED FOR BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS SERVICE AND AREAS IN NATIONAL PARKS IN WHICH THERE IS THE GREATEST NEED FOR CELLULAR SERVICE, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

**JUNE 21, 2023**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 2018, a bill to require the Secretary of the Interior to conduct an assessment to identify locations in National Parks in which there is the greatest need for broadband internet access service and areas in National Parks in which there is the greatest need for cellular service, and for other purposes.

The Department supports the goal of S. 2018 to better understand and prioritize the broadband internet and cellular service needs of the National Park Service. However, because this bill was only recently introduced, the Department would appreciate having more time to evaluate the bill and work with the sponsor and Committee on amendments.

S. 2018 would direct the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Director of the National Park Service (NPS), to conduct an assessment of national parks to determine where there is the greatest need for broadband internet access service and cellular service. For broadband internet access service, the assessment would consider availability in housing, administrative facilities, campgrounds, and locations where that service is determined to be necessary. For cellular service, the assessment would consider areas that would increase the access of the public to emergency services, or the communications capabilities of National Park Service employees.

S. 2018 would also direct the Secretary to develop a plan, based on the results of the assessment, to install broadband internet access and cellular service infrastructure in national parks. Requirements of the plan would include consultation with local stakeholders, provide for minimal disruptions to park resources, and provide for the use of public-private partnerships among other requirements.

More than 400 units of the National Park System stretch from Guam to the Virgin Islands and from Alaska to Florida across the United States. While some parks are located in or near developed areas, others are in or near remote wilderness. The diversity in landscapes means that internet access and cell phone service vary in different parks—and can even be inconsistent within the boundaries of an individual park. Due to the remoteness of some parks, costs to provide internet and cellular service can be quite high, regardless of whether the agency or a provider takes on those costs.

The NPS provides free Wi-Fi internet service at some visitor centers and other facilities around the country. In addition, many concession operations in parks, such as lodges and restaurants, provide some form of internet for visitors, either for free or for an additional charge.

The NPS is acting in support of Executive Order 13821, *Streamlining and Expediting Requests to Locate Broadband Facilities in Rural America* and the Presidential Memorandum, *Supporting Broadband Tower Facilities in Rural America on Federal Properties Managed by the Department of the Interior*. The NPS has created a Right-of-Way (ROW) webpage to provide more information for individuals and companies interested in applying for ROW permits from the bureau, including to provide internet and cellular service. It holds a bi-annual internal training on ROW permitting process for headquarters, region, and park staff. The NPS has a national ROW permitting team and a ROW coordinator in each region to support parks in processing ROW permit applications.

All bureaus of the Department coordinate to maintain a web-based mapping application that allows users to see locations of existing federal broadband infrastructure, filter data, and add layers for analysis.

While the Department believes the assessment and plan required under this bill could be useful in focusing the NPS's efforts on its greatest internet and cellular service needs, we recommend amending S. 2018 in a few areas.

First, as defined in S. 2018, the term "National Park" means a unit of the National Park System that is designated as a "national park". While we understand that the focus of this bill is increasing internet and cellular access in the more expansive and remote parks, there are many units designated as "national recreation area", "national preserve", or similar titles that have the same access issues that many of our large remote units designated as "national parks" have. To conduct the assessment and prepare the plan proposed by this legislation fairly, we believe that all units should be included. To achieve this, we recommend amending the bill's definition of "National Park" to include all units of the National Park System.

Second, we are concerned that the bill's timeframes of 180 days and two years would not be sufficient to complete the assessment and plan, respectively, with existing resources. We recommend that the bill be amended to extend these timeframes.

Third, the bill requires consultation with parks' local stakeholders in developing the plan. We recommend that Tribes be explicitly included as consulting parties on the plan as well.

Finally, we have a number of suggested technical edits and, as mentioned previously, we may have additional recommendations upon further evaluation of S. 2018. The Department welcomes the opportunity to work with the bill's sponsor and the Committee on these amendments before the Committee acts on the bill.

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