

Statement of Kristen Brengel
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Before the Senate Subcommittee on National Parks
On S. 3172, Restore Our Parks Act
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Chairman Daines, Ranking Member King and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the Restore Our Parks Act. I am Kristen Brengel, Vice-President for Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading national, independent voice for protecting and enhancing America's National Park System for present and future generations. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our views regarding legislation to address the serious deferred maintenance backlog that threatens the wellbeing of our parks and the experiences of their visitors.

Through my testimony I will describe the scope of the national park deferred maintenance needs and the urgency of addressing the need through a robust, consistent and dependable funding source; I also outline that this need is not without context, and that there are other significant funding and conservation needs facing our parks, including but by no means limited to the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

To address the backlog, increasing appropriations is critical, as are supplemental funding sources including philanthropic giving and appropriate fee revenue. However, ultimately what is needed to address the full scope of the maintenance backlog facing our parks is dedicated funding, which is why we are pleased to testify in full support of this bill today. We were grateful to Sen. Warner for his leadership, as well as Sen. Portman and House champions in introducing the National Park Service Legacy Act, and while we had concerns with the funding source for the National Park Restoration Act, we were also very pleased to see Sen. Alexander's efforts to find a workable solution to parks' repair needs. We now commend members from both parties and the administration for developing consensus legislation, Restore Our Parks Act, that will make the needed dedicated funding possible. We urge Congress to move this bill towards passage in the remainder of this session.

WORTHY OF INVESTMENT

Our national parks are perhaps the one federal institution for which there is universal pride in this country. Polling conducted by NPCA and others indicates the vast popularity of national parks and strong bipartisan support for adequately funding them because they protect our cultural and natural heritage.

Our national parks are not only a source of pride; they are economic engines that return \$10 in economic benefits nationally for every dollar that is invested in them. The economic value of parks has grown along with visitation so that last year, national parks supported nearly \$36 billion in economic activity and 306,000 jobs.

Caring for an inventory of assets second only to that of the Department of Defense requires consistent and sufficient funding. Unfortunately, the National Park Service has been chronically underfunded when it comes to not only keeping up with cyclical repairs but replacing infrastructure that has reached the end of its life cycle, such as is the case with many park roads and water systems, buildings and other infrastructure that has been deteriorating over time without the requisite capital investment.

The most recent estimate of the deferred maintenance repair backlog facing the parks is \$11.6 billion. That is nearly four times the total annual appropriated budget of the National Park Service. Maintenance projects are considered deferred if the National Park Service (NPS) is unable to make the repair within a year.

Park facilities throughout the system face a diversity of maintenance needs, from roads and buildings to trails, water systems, docks, parking lots and more. The National Park Service estimates that 40% of its nearly 10,000 miles of roads are in poor to fair condition and that it has more than \$270 million in deferred maintenance for the 1,887 wastewater systems it manages across the park system. A few examples of some of the facility repairs needed include:

- **Roads:** Kolob Canyon Road, a popular five-mile scenic drive at **Zion National Park**, needs \$15 million in repairs—an amount that is nearly equal to the entire value of the road itself.
- **Trails:** Also at **Zion**, among millions of dollars in trail needs are the Overlook Point Trail, the famed Angel’s Landing Trail and the West Rim Trail. Walking, hiking, and biking trails at **Yosemite National Park** are in disrepair or closed. More than \$17 million in deferred maintenance affects these systems, including the Yosemite Bike Path, the Stubblefield Canyon Trail, and the Clark Point Spur Trail.
- **Campsites:** At **Voyageurs National Park**, campsites have more than \$1 million worth of deferred maintenance. This includes restoring and improving tent sites, maintaining fire rings, and repairing and installing new bear-proof food storage lockers.
- **Water Systems:** At **Rocky Mountain National Park**, the primary water system at the park’s headquarters, where the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center is located, has 50- to 70-year-old pipes that need to be replaced. The cost estimate for this work is nearly \$5 million.

Repairs are not only needed for facilities that promote and enhance the visiting experience, but also for infrastructure that helps protect natural resources, such as channel markers in the Everglades National Park that prevent boaters from harming sensitive seagrasses.

The repair backlog also includes many historic structures and features of national significance. From the inspiring civil rights movement history shared at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park’s historic buildings to the several hundred Native American cultural sites and cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park, these world-renowned places tell the diverse stories of our nation. Unfortunately, according to Fiscal Year 2016 data, historic assets represent 45% of the maintenance backlog and without dedicated funding to address these needs, conditions will continue to deteriorate and risk permanent loss of these resources. Examples of historic resources deferred maintenance include:

- **Historic buildings:** At **San Antonio Missions National Historical Park**, nearly \$400,000 is needed to repair the office and sacristy of the Franciscan father-president, who oversaw development of these historically important missions. A compound where Native Americans lived, and the walls that encircle it, also requires restoration at a cost of \$600,000.
- **Historic landscapes** at **Gettysburg National Military Park** comprise by far the largest investment need to restore the park to its original appearance, including addressing invasive plants.

INADEQUATE INVESTMENTS IN OUR NATIONAL TREASURES

We commend Congress for increasing investments in park transportation infrastructure in the last transportation bill, the FAST Act, and for increasing appropriations for non-transportation deferred maintenance the last five fiscal years. However, as we have noted to this committee, these investments remain insufficient, which points to the importance of the bill before us today.

Further exacerbating the lack of funding for park repairs are recent staffing losses compounded by significant visitation increases. Across NPS, staffing has fallen 11% since 2011, while during the same period visitation has increased 19%. When there aren't enough employees, workers must triage to ensure the best experience for park visitors and take care of visitor safety. Employees get pulled away from the jobs they were hired for, like trail maintenance, to do more pressing tasks like crowd control on busy days. With employees juggling tasks to keep visitors safe and improve their experience, it only further challenges the deferred maintenance problem.

To make up for the shortfall in appropriated dollars, the National Park Service relies upon supplemental sources of funding. For example, the successful **Centennial Challenge** program leverages two federal dollars for every private dollar invested in signature projects across the parks. **Fees** also play an important role, particularly in high visitation parks such as Yellowstone, but are not a realistic or appropriate source to provide the level of funding needed to address the bulk of park maintenance needs. The NPS has had some success in its application for **grants** from several transportation programs, such as CMAQ, TIGER and FASTLANE, but these programs are only available to a narrow set of transportation projects and come with local match requirements. In recent years, NPS has explored avenues for greater cost savings such as improvements in **energy efficiency**. Overall, however, these and other supplemental funding sources cannot cover the scope of the backlog problem; a serious federal investment is needed. There are many large-scale water, wastewater and other projects that lack philanthropic appeal and simply cannot be realistically funded through these and other current funding sources.

WHY THE RESTORE OUR PARKS ACT IS A GOOD SOLUTION

Clearly, a dedicated, robust funding source to address the large scope of the backlog is needed. We commend Senators Warner, Portman, Alexander and King for introducing the Restore Our Parks Act (S. 3172). We also commend the Administration for expressing its support for the legislation. The bill would dedicate up to \$6.5 billion to the parks to address the deferred maintenance backlog over five years through receipts from onshore and offshore energy development not otherwise dedicated to other purposes. It is only through such broad collaboration that can make significant and needed progress on addressing the national park deferred maintenance backlog. However, robust annual appropriations and transportation bill funding remain necessary to ensure additional resources don't fall into disrepair and to continue to address the highest priority repair projects.

NPCA is pleased that the Restore Our Parks Act includes:

- **Certainty of Funding:** Construction projects rely on multi-year funding that is known and dependable at the outset, which in part helps NPS to stage projects and work with contractors

who need funding certainty. Without the certainty of funding the NPS would be challenged in its contracting and procurement efforts. The backlog includes many projects such as replacement of water systems and reconstruction of lengthy stretches of roadways that are multi-year and require a steady stream of funding. Based upon recent revenue reports, the National Park Service Legacy Restoration Fund is expected to achieve the \$1.3 billion allocation authorized annually by the Act.

- Funding Parity Between Transportation and Non-transportation Deferred Maintenance Needs: The Restore Our Parks Act splits 35/65 the funding between transportation and non-transportation projects. Although transportation deferred maintenance comprises more than half of the backlog, transportation projects have other sources of funding, such as the Federal Lands Transportation Program annual allocation, to draw upon. The formula in the Act allows for a balanced approach to addressing the broad range of deferred maintenance needs.
- Private donation acceptance: The NPS will not only be allowed to accept private donations toward the retirement of the backlog but is *encouraged* to secure relevant partnerships.
- Prohibition of use of the fund to offset annual appropriations for cyclical maintenance and operations: This guarantees that the funds are used specifically to reduce the maintenance backlog and does not get diverted to make up for shortfalls in the appropriated maintenance accounts.
- No Time Limit on Use of Funds: As described above, there are many projects, especially large transportation projects, such as the reconstruction of the Grand Loop Road at Yellowstone, that may take longer than the five-year lifespan of the program to be completed. This provision ensures that once the money has been allocated to the Park Service it is available until it is needed and does not put lengthy projects at a disadvantage.

We do have one policy addition we urge the committee to consider making to S. 3172. There is no doubt that at the end of the five years there will be a substantial reduction in the deferred maintenance backlog. There is also very little doubt that there still will be a backlog, possibly at least half of the current balance. We urge that a provision be added that calls for an evaluation of the progress of the fund and leaves open the possibility of it being reauthorized.

ONGOING PARK NEEDS

As noted earlier, the deferred maintenance backlog is not the only funding issue facing our national parks. Dedicating funding to deferred maintenance will, we hope, allow Congress and park staff to dedicate resources towards other park needs and issues that have been lingering. These includes drastic increases in visitation and the management challenges associated with them, dwindling wildlife habitat, and updating interpretation by making it more modern and telling stories of all who played a part in our history. Superintendents widely report the challenges of insufficient base operational funds to address these and other issues, which affect the experience of visitors, influencing the health of park gateway economies, and impact the ability of park staff to protect park resources. We can make national park experiences even better, and better protect parks' natural and historic resources, if we have less deferred maintenance issues competing for funding.

Furthermore, we believe better funding in tandem with conservation and preservation will continue to allow our parks to thrive. There are nearly 40 bills before this committee, or ready for floor action from this committee, that are priorities for NPCA. In short, we maintain that the backlog challenge is one

among many facing our national parks and that in addition to better funding our parks, conservation and historic preservation must be a priority for this and any future Congress.

THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

A critical funding issue facing our parks is the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). NPCA has testified to this and other congressional committees about the importance of enhancing support for this invaluable conservation program. This program has successfully protected National Park Service sites from incompatible residential and commercial development for more than fifty years, with now more than four million park service-managed acres acquired and permanently protected through acquisition, donations and exchanges. According to NPS estimates, there remain at least 1.6 million non-federal acres in our national parks, which would cost more than an estimated \$2 billion for purchase, pointing to the need for enhanced congressional support.

Appropriations should be increased for LWCF, and the program should be provided with needed reauthorization before the current authorization expires at the end of this fiscal year. The program should also receive dedicated funding given its more than 50-year track record of success and the many continuing acquisition needs. We commend Senators Cantwell, Burr and numerous other bipartisan members of the Senate and House for their work to champion LWCF's needed reauthorization and dedicated funding. NPCA and our members feel strongly that protecting and restoring our national parks must take place on numerous fronts, and that while addressing deferred maintenance is critical, it is of equal importance to protecting parks from incompatible development.

In conclusion, NPCA and our many partners concerned with the park funding crisis are grateful that members of Congress on both sides of the aisle are now prioritizing national park infrastructure. We also commend the administration for prioritizing the issue and supporting the Restore Our Parks Act.

We urge the subcommittee take quick action to advance the Restore Our Parks Act so that our national parks can begin to be repaired and restored for the benefit of their resources and for the enjoyment of the millions of American families who visit them each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for the committee's consideration of our views.