

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. 2620, TO ESTABLISH THE CHESAPEAKE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA AS A UNIT 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 present the Department of the Interior's views on S.2620 to establish the Chesapeake National Recreation Area as a unit of the National Park System, and for other purposes.

The Department supports S. 2620 with amendments. This legislation would increase national recognition and public appreciation of the vitally important natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources associated with the Chesapeake Bay and the role they play in our national identity. We would like to work with the sponsors and the Committee on certain aspects of the legislation that we believe would improve its implementation.

S. 2620 would establish a new unit of the National Park System, the Chesapeake National Recreation Area, that would be administered in coordination with the existing National Park Service (NPS) Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network (Chesapeake Gateways program), an extensive partnership system of multiple sites and programs. The national recreation area would consist of three sites upon enactment—the most northern portion of Fort Monroe National Monument in Hampton, Virginia, which is part of the area known as North Beach; the 18th century Whitehall estate; and the Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse off the coast of Annapolis. The NPS would also be directed to establish three administrative, interpretive, and visitor service sites: one at the 19th century Burtis house in Annapolis; one in historic downtown Annapolis; and one in or around Fort Monroe. The NPS could acquire additional sites or enter into agreements with other entities to partner on the administration of sites that would be added to the recreation area's boundary. An advisory commission would be established that would, among other things, provide recommended site acquisition criteria and specific sites to consider for acquisition.

S. 2620 would also provide for the permanent authorization of the Chesapeake Gateways program, which is a critically important element of this legislation. Since its inception in 1998, the program has been authorized for only a few years at a time. This program operates throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed and serves to identify, conserve, restore, and interpret natural, recreational, historical, and cultural resources. It provides technical and financial assistance to both the public and private sectors and has since 2000 provided over \$26 million in financial assistance across the watershed. Over 200 sites are now part of this network. We note that permanent authorization of the program was recommended in the NPS's 2004 special

resource study of the Chesapeake Bay. The Department not only supports the permanent authorization of this program, which would remove the uncertainty about its future but also recommends removing the bill's annual appropriation ceiling to help ensure its continued success as costs increase over time.

While the Department supports the continued activity of the Chesapeake Gateways program throughout the entire 41 million-acre Chesapeake Bay watershed, we believe that the scope of the proposed national recreation area should be limited to areas in and around the Bay itself. A unit of the National Park System with a more defined geographical range would present a more focused and coherent interpretation of the Bay to the public. It would be more feasible to administer than a unit that could include sites hundreds of miles away from what the public generally considers the Chesapeake Bay. Directly managing park lands and visitor centers involves significantly more staffing, operation, and maintenance costs than operating a program that is based on entering into agreements for sites owned and managed by other entities; this is why we consider managing a partnership program that extends throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed feasible but believe that managing a unit of the National Park System covering the same area would be far more challenging.

Because the NPS already administers many other sites within the watershed and partners with many entities through the Chesapeake Gateways program, there is strong NPS infrastructure throughout the watershed that promotes public understanding and appreciation of the Chesapeake Bay. This bill recognizes the role that existing NPS entities could play in that endeavor by directing the development of an implementation plan to promote understanding of the watershed's resources at other NPS units and partner sites directly associated with the watershed. These sites can help fulfill the bill's goal of promoting public understanding of the Chesapeake Bay while reducing the need for a new national recreation area composed of individual sites throughout the entire watershed.

The bill would authorize the Secretary to acquire lands or interests in lands located outside the boundary of the proposed national recreation area in consultation with the advisory commission authorized by the bill. The advisory commission would be charged with recommending criteria for partner sites and NPS-managed sites, as well as recommending specific sites for addition to the national recreation area. This provision is unusual in terms of the wide latitude it grants the Secretary for acquiring new land and in the role it envisions for the advisory commission in determining what new lands should be acquired. The NPS has long-established guidelines and criteria for evaluating new areas for possible inclusion in the National Park System that are grounded in existing law and policy; these criteria would be appropriate to use and would meet the needs of the proposed national recreation area while maintaining consistency with systemwide land acquisition practices.

The bill would also provide authority for the Secretary to enter into cooperative management agreements with eligible partner sites, among which may be private non-profit organizations or private landowners, for the acquisition of goods and services. Under current law, the NPS has

authority to enter into cooperative management agreements only with other governmental entities. Providing authority to enter into cooperative management agreements with private entities raises significant concerns for management and oversight. The NPS employs a range of mechanisms, such as cooperative agreements, leasing, and contracting, that could be undertaken with private entities to meet the mutual objectives of the NPS and private partner sites.

In the context of providing for coordination between the Chesapeake Gateways program and the Chesapeake National Recreation Area, the bill specifies the location of the headquarters for the national recreation area and appears to specify that the superintendent of the two entities must be the same person. Leaving decisions about the headquarters location and the management structure of the two entities to the NPS would allow for administrative flexibility and improved efficiency over time.

Finally, the bill requires transportation planning to minimize the traffic burden on communities surrounding the sites in the national recreation area. We understand the local concerns that are being considered and addressed by this provision. It is a common practice for the NPS to prepare transportation studies or site-specific transportation plans; however, such work is normally undertaken in the context of the specific needs and priorities of the site. The NPS would like to reserve the ability to determine the need for transportation planning within the national recreation area and, if undertaken, determine its scope.

We appreciate the hard work that has gone into developing a bill that would make the outstanding resources of the Chesapeake Bay more accessible, better protected, and better appreciated by the public. We look forward to helping advance this legislation by working with the sponsors and the Committee on amendments that would address the concerns described in this statement.

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