

STATEMENT OF LIZZIE WATTS, SUPERINTENDENT, NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING S. 2555, TO REDESIGNATE THE NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER IN THE STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA AS THE “NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE”.

February 22, 2020

Ranking Member Manchin and Senator Capito, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior’s views on S. 2555, to designate New River Gorge National River in the State of West Virginia as the “New River Gorge National Park and Preserve.” It is a pleasure to have you here at the National Park System site that you have proposed to redesignate.

The Department appreciates that you, the sponsors of S. 2555, and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee share our interest in adhering to longstanding precedents and traditions in the designation of units of the National Park System. We appreciate your effort to avoid naming areas where hunting is allowed as a “national park”; to do so would not be consistent with the National Park Service (NPS) and Congressional precedent. We do not object to naming New River Gorge National River as “New River Gorge National Park and Preserve” with hunting allowed in only the areas designated as “preserve,” as S. 2555 would do, but we would like to continue to work with you and Members of the Committee on suggested alternatives.

During the 115th Congress, the Department testified on S. 3534, which would have redesignated New River Gorge National River as “New River Gorge National Park.” We noted that while New River Gorge National River contains spectacular features that rival those in units designated as national parks, Congress, with the support of the Department, has reserved the title of “national park” for units where hunting is not authorized. Units where hunting is allowed are typically designated as “preserves,” “national recreation areas”, or, depending on their location, “national seashores” or “national lakeshores.” Some areas of the National Park System have both a “national park” and a “national preserve” associated with them in order to separate the areas where hunting is, and is not, permitted. Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska is such an example. In testimony, we indicated our support for S. 3534 if amended to redesignate New River Gorge National River with a title that is in keeping with standard NPS nomenclature, and offered to work with both of you on alternative designations. After the hearing, we prepared maps and other materials to discuss four options with your offices. We present them again here:

National Parks of Southern West Virginia – This alternative proposed informally, rather than statutorily, referring to New River Gorge National River, the Gauley River National Recreation Area, and Bluestone National Scenic River, as the “National Parks of Southern West Virginia.” Signs, brochures, and marketing materials could use that name. It is the same approach that is being used for other park groups, including the National Parks of New York Harbor, the National Parks of Eastern North Carolina, the National Parks of Western Pennsylvania, and the National Mall and Memorial Parks. These park groups capitalize on proximity to market their park units

within the context of their geographic area. No legislation would be required to adopt this approach, although the House and Senate could pass a Sense of Congress resolution urging adoption of the use of this name to collectively identify the three parks. This alternative could be central to reinvigorating a previous local effort to promote the region through the National Parks of Southern West Virginia. The principal benefit of this approach is that it offers the use of the “national park” brand without affecting hunting opportunities.

New River Gorge National Recreation Area – This alternative proposed renaming the entire New River Gorge National River as the “New River Gorge National Recreation Area.” Such a designation would be consistent with standard NPS nomenclature for units that allow hunting and well as other recreation activities, and it would have no effect on hunting opportunities. Many of the most popular large natural areas managed by the NPS are designated as national recreation areas, such as Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. Of the options that would redesignate New River Gorge by statute, this alternative is the most consistent with NPS management of similar units.

New River Gorge National Park & Preserve II – This is the alternative that is largely presented in this bill. We refer to it as number “II” because it was identified that way on the maps the NPS prepared to illustrate this proposal. In this proposal, the “National Park” part of the unit would be designated for four non-contiguous areas that encompass approximately 7,691 acres of land and reflect the most scenic and historically significant portions of the park, as is standard for areas designated as national parks. The “National Preserve” portion of the unit would encompass the balance of the land within the present boundary, approximately 64,495 acres. This alternative would affect hunting opportunities by closing approximately 4,385 acres where hunting is presently allowed and would change access to some popular hunting areas.

New River Gorge National Park & Preserve I – Under the alternative we refer to as “National Park & Preserve I,” the “National Park” would encompass five, non-contiguous areas comprised of the 1,815 acres that are already closed to hunting. The “National Preserve” would encompass the remaining 70,371 acres of lands within the present boundary. This alternative would not affect hunting opportunities. However, with the exception of Canyon Rim, it does not include the most significant areas of the park among the areas that would have national park status.

The Department would like to continue to work with you and the other members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee as you try to resolve the issues surrounding S. 2555.

Ranking Member Manchin and Senator Capito, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.