

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE NATIONAL  
PARK SYSTEM, INCLUDING THE IMPACTS  
OF COVID-19 ON NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
OPERATIONS, STAFF, VISITATION, AND FACILITIES

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
NATIONAL PARKS  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON  
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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MAY 26, 2021  
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**WEDNESDAY, MAY 26, 2021**

U.S. SENATE,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS,  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m. in Room SD-366, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Angus S. King, Jr., Chairman of the Subcommittee presiding.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE**

Senator KING: Good morning and welcome to the first National Park Subcommittee hearing of the 117th Congress. Let me first thank the witnesses for appearing at today's hearing on the state of our national parks.

Our national parks play a huge role in what we think about when we think of America. From Acadia and the National Mall in the East to Yellowstone and Yosemite and Glacier in the West, they hold a special place for millions of Americans. They connect us with our history and the natural world. They restore us, they inspire us, and they recharge us at a deep level. Like everywhere in the last 15 months, this has been a difficult period for the National Park System. Frontline park employees had to change how and even if they could interact with the public. Many park services and visitor centers were forced to shutter. Many seasonal employees were not hired and gateway communities completely lost their 2020 season. Some of our biggest and most famous parks suffered significant drops in attendance, but we also saw parks closer to urban centers have increased visitors, showing that people still wanted to get outdoors, even if they could not travel as far.

Today's hearing will look at how the Park Service, gateway communities, concessionaires, and visitors all weathered this difficult time and how we will move forward in what I predict will be one of the biggest seasons—in fact, I will go out on a limb—I think it will be the biggest season in the history of the Park Service. And it is my hope that this hearing will inform our work for the rest of this Congress, especially as we work closely with the National Park Service (NPS) to fulfill the rewarding responsibilities that

come with the Great American Outdoors Act, which we passed, as you know, last year. Also, while I know we will touch on it here, I hope to have a hearing on the issue of congestion at our parks later this summer as it is an issue that fully deserves a hearing on its own.

Let me introduce our witnesses.

Shawn Bengé is the Acting Director of the National Park Service. He has been with the Park Service for over 30 years. While he has served in multiple roles at headquarters since 2016, he has also held jobs throughout the service. He served in numerous capacities at the park level, including superintendent assignments at Big Bend National Park—one of my favorite national parks, by the way, Mr. Bengé, Big Bend National Park—Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, Everglades National Park, and a tour also at the Denver Service Center, the National Park Service’s Central Planning and Design Office.

Ken Burns is a filmmaker known to millions of Americans for his documentaries. I consider his documentary of the Civil War the greatest documentary ever produced. His 12-hour Emmy Award winning documentary, “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea”, brought our parks to millions around the world and changed how many of us view these landscapes and their history.

David MacDonald is a Mainer, President of Friends of Acadia and President of the National Park Friends Alliance Steering Committee. I have known David for many years. His leadership of the Friends of Acadia shows how important non-profits can be in helping our parks and communities to be as successful as they are.

Finally, we are joined by Mr. Scott Socha, Chair of the National Park Hospitality Association and Group President for Parks and Travel for Delaware North. The National Park Hospitality Association represents the businesses and concessionaires that work with the parks and provide many of the services to park visitors.

Again, let me thank everyone for appearing today. After Senator Daines’ opening statement, each witness will have five minutes for opening statements and then we will alternate with members for five-minute rounds of questions.

Senator Daines.

**STATEMENT OF HON. STEVE DAINES,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Senator DAINES. Chairman King, thank you. It is truly great to be back at the dais here with you and to have a Subcommittee hearing which, I think I could speak for the Chairman, this is our favorite Subcommittee and that we are grateful to continue to be part of it.

I also want to thank all the witnesses with us here today. We have a very good panel and I look forward to a good conversation.

This is our first National Parks Subcommittee hearing since the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. I was proud to work on that important bill with Chairman King and to get it signed into law. Our national parks are part of what truly sets America apart from the rest of the world, and this bill was a historic investment in our parks at a very critical time. The National Parks and Public

Land Legacy Restoration Fund that was created as part of the Great American Outdoors Act is a bipartisan down payment on infrastructure. We now need to ensure that it is being implemented efficiently. I am sure the Chairman and I will be working together a lot on the status and implementation and many other important park-related issues.

Well, today's topic is the state of the National Park System and we all know, as the Chairman pointed out, that 2020 was a historic year. No one could have predicted the impact of COVID-19 on our society, our way of life, our economy. However, I truly believe that our national parks were a refuge, they were a refuge for many Americans during the pandemic. It was good for the soul when Americans visited their national parks. Our national parks allowed folks to get outdoors, get away from the crowds, experience the beauty and the history of our country, and this is borne out by the visitation numbers. I will share some numbers from Yellowstone National Park. Despite being closed down for a short time and having very few international visitors, Yellowstone National Park still had 3.8 million visitors. Now think about that. That was only a slight decline from four million in 2019. In 2021, visitations are hitting above average highs each month, and I also share the Chairman's prediction that we are going to have record years in our national parks in visitation this year.

As it warms up in Montana—sometimes it takes a while to do that, as we had snow last weekend in my hometown in the Gallatin Valley—our smaller parks, like Big Hole National Battlefield, are beginning to see visitation rise again. I look forward to discussing how we can drive visitation to these smaller parks. And it is not just about the visitation numbers, I also want to examine how the parks and our gateway communities worked together during last year and how we can learn from our experience to strengthen relationships between our parks and our gateway communities.

The state of our parks also means the state of our park employees, the concessionaires, and all those who live and work in our parks. Employee morale, employee housing, employee health are all things I have heard about recently. I would like to hear updates on what the park is doing to ensure a happy and a healthy workforce. Furthermore, concessionaires have had an unprecedented year and we need to ensure that as we move forward, we address any issues that arose from last year's park closure.

With that, I will turn back to the Chairman, and I look forward to a good conversation here today.

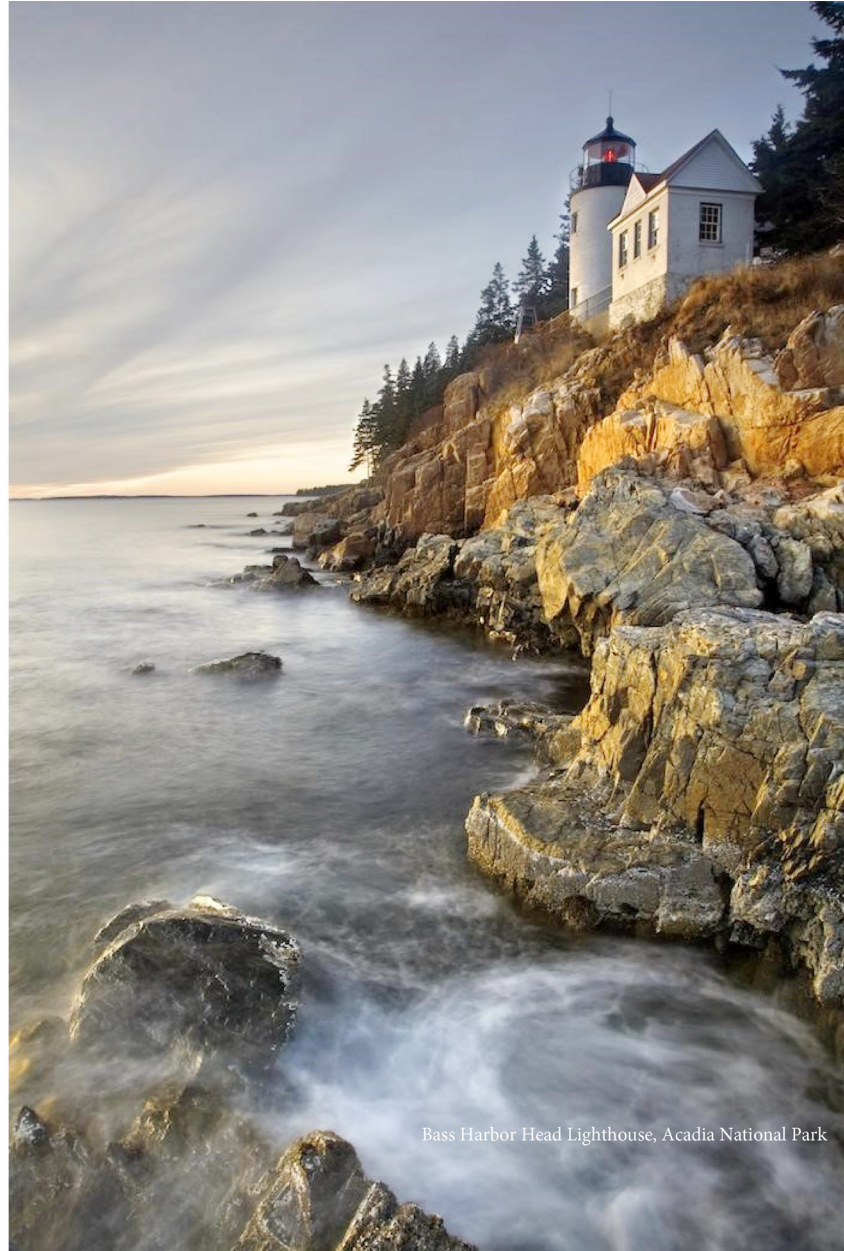
Senator KING. Thank you, Senator Daines.

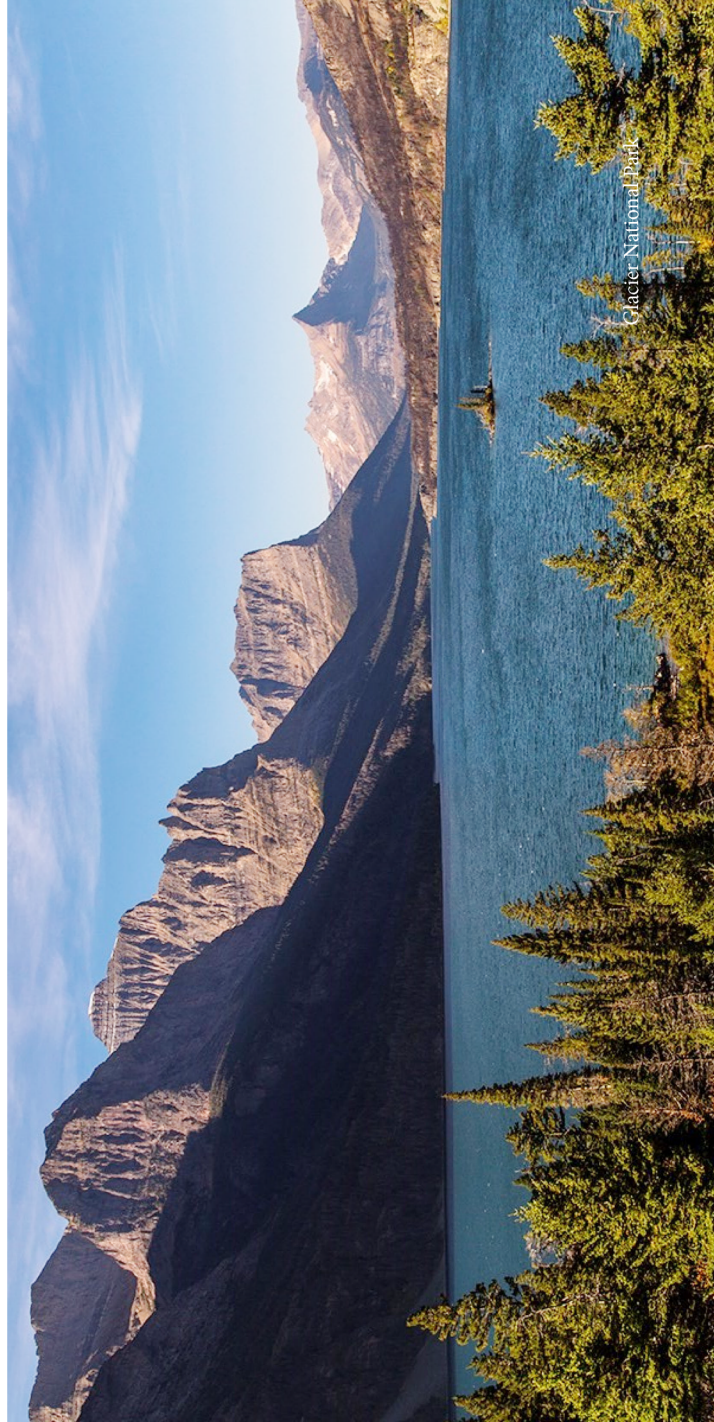
I would like to point out that there are a series of pictures around our hearing room today, some of which show the beauty of our national parks. Not surprisingly, one is in Maine and one is in Montana. This is just a coincidence actually, I think, Senator.

[Laughter.]

Senator KING. But also, some of them show lines of automobiles and people lined up in order to try to have access to these wonderful places, which is one of the questions we will examine today, but also in a hearing later this year.

[The photographs referenced by Senator King follow:]







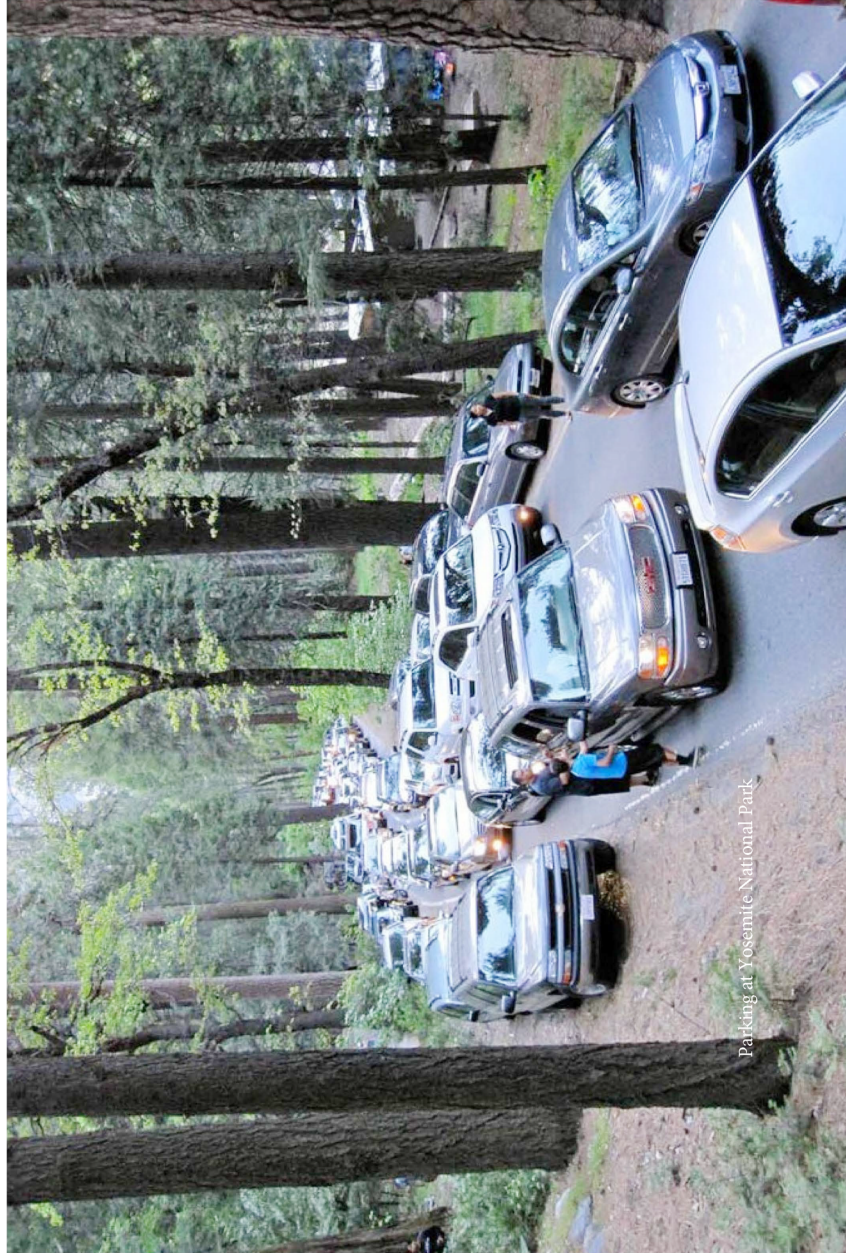












Senator KING. I first wanted to ask to join us, Mr. Ken Burns, from the State of New Hampshire, which has the virtue of being next door to Maine. Mr. Burns really introduced the world to America's national parks and did so in an extraordinary, beautiful way with his partner Dayton Duncan.

Ken Burns, thank you for joining us and we look forward to your testimony.

#### **STATEMENT OF KEN BURNS, FILMMAKER**

Mr. BURNS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and neighbor, very grateful to be invited, an honor, in fact, to testify before your committee. I should say at the outset that I am not an expert on the current state of the National Park System or the impacts of COVID-19.

My life's work has been in telling the history of this nation, but I am a firm believer that our shared and complicated past has things to say and many lessons for the present. Our national parks are a treasure house of superlatives, more than 80 million acres of the most stunning landscapes anyone has ever seen, from the continent's highest mountain in Alaska to groves of the world's tallest, biggest, and oldest trees in California and Nevada. From a sacred volcano in Hawaii that continuously gives birth to new land in the Pacific, to a promontory in Maine that catches the nation's first rays of sun over the Atlantic. From the Earth's grandest canyon in Arizona to the world's greatest collection of geysers in a geological wonderland in Wyoming. I should add for your colleague, Senator Manchin, this treasure house most recently includes the spectacular New River Gorge.

These are geographies of memory and hope where countless American families have formed an intimate connection to their land and then passed it along to their children. But they also embody something less tangible, yet equally enduring, an idea born in the United States nearly a century after its founding, as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical. For the first time in human history, we decided that a nation's most magnificent places should be set aside and preserved, not for royalty or the rich or well connected, but for everyone and for all time. My colleague, Dayton Duncan, and I, both proud to have been named honorary park rangers, like to say that the national parks are the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape. The writer and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks "the best idea we've ever had."

Theodore Roosevelt, the nation's greatest conservation president, considered the national park idea "noteworthy in its essential democracy. One of the best bits of national achievement which our people have to their credit." Like the idea of America itself, full of competing demands and impulses, lofty ideals and imperfect struggles to live up to them, the national park idea has been constantly debated, constantly tested, and is constantly evolving, ultimately embracing historical places that also preserve our nation's first principles, its highest aspirations, its greatest sacrifices, even reminders of its most shameful mistakes. Too often, I think, Americans tend to take all of this for granted. Saving such places, to borrow a word from the Declaration, seems so "self-evident." We mis-

takenly assume that doing so is easy, almost automatic. History tells us otherwise.

The history of every national park is usually the story of individual Americans who fell in love with that place so completely that they decided it should be preserved so that all Americans, in generations they would never know, could have the same chance to see it with the same fresh eyes. It was always a struggle. It was never easy. But the victories made us a better nation. As we made our documentary on the history of the national parks, Dayton and I played a thought experiment with each other. Imagine the United States without the national parks. Yosemite Valley could just as easily have become a gated community with a private golf course in the center. The rim of the Grand Canyon could be lined with trophy homes, each one with a "keep out" sign preventing you from gazing down into that awesome chasm and feeling connected to the eons of time. The Everglades, with its abundantly diverse wildlife could have been drained and made into shopping centers. Yellowstone could have become an amusement park called "Geyser World".

Fortunately, beginning in 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone as the world's first national park, your predecessors in previous Congresses pointed the arc of history in a different direction. In the midst of the Great Depression, thousands of destitute young men found employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps to help them and their families survive by working to improve the national parks. Following World War II, when millions of reunited families loaded up in their station wagons and set out to enjoy the parks and overwhelm the facilities, Congress and the Park Service embarked on Mission 66 to build better roads and visitor centers to accommodate the crowds. And I want to congratulate and thank many of you who, last year, passed the landmark legislation and funding to address infrastructure and maintenance backlog in the parks that had been growing for decades. There's still obviously more work to be done.

At the heart of the national park idea is the notion that every American, whether their ancestors came over on the Mayflower or were here to begin with, or whether they just arrived, whether they're from a big city or a farm, whether their father runs a factory or their mother is a maid, every American is a part owner of some of the best seafront property in the nation. They own magnificent waterfalls and stunning views of majestic mountains and gorgeous canyons. They have a stake in making sure that, as Theodore Roosevelt also said, "these places are preserved for their children and their children's children, forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Burns follows:]

May 26, 2021

National Parks Testimony (state of the parks/COVID pandemic)

Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks

Remarks from Ken Burns, Filmmaker

Florentine Films, Walpole, NH 03608

Submitted 5-21-21

It's an honor to be invited to testify before your committee. I should say at the outset that I am not an expert on the current state of the National Park System or the impacts of COVID 19. My life's work has been in the history of this nation, but I am a firm believer that our shared and complicated past has things to say--and lessons--for the present.

Our national parks are a treasure house of superlatives--more than 80 million acres of the most stunning landscapes anyone has ever seen--from the continent's highest mountain in Alaska to groves of the world's tallest, biggest and oldest trees in California; from a sacred volcano in Hawaii that continuously gives birth to new land in the Pacific to a promontory in Maine that catches the nation's first rays of sun over the Atlantic; from the earth's grandest canyon in Arizona to the world's greatest collection of geysers in a geological wonderland in Wyoming. And I should add, Senator Manchin, this treasure house most recently includes the spectacular New River Gorge.

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But they also embody something less tangible yet equally enduring--an idea, born in the United States nearly a century after its founding, as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical.

For the first time in human history, we decided that a nation's most magnificent places should be set aside and preserved, not for royalty or the rich or well-connected, but for everyone and for all time.

My colleague Dayton Duncan and I--both proud to have been named Honorary Park Rangers--like to say that national parks are the Declaration of Independence applied to the land. The writer and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks "the best idea we ever had."

Theodore Roosevelt, the nation's greatest conservation president, considered the national park idea "noteworthy in its essential democracy, one of the best bits of

national achievement which our people have to their credit. And our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

Like the idea of America itself--full of competing demands and impulses, lofty ideals and imperfect struggles to live up to them--the national park idea has been constantly debated, constantly tested, and constantly evolving, ultimately embracing historical places that also preserve our nation's first principles, its highest aspirations, its greatest sacrifices--even reminders of its most shameful mistakes.

Too often, I think, Americans tend to take all this for granted. Saving such places seems, to borrow a word from the Declaration, so "self-evident," we mistakenly assume that doing so was easy, almost automatic.

History tells us otherwise.

The history of every national park is usually the story of individual Americans who fell in love with that place so completely that they decided it should be preserved so that all Americans, in generations they would never know, could have the same chance to see it with the same fresh eyes.

It was always a struggle. It was never easy. But the victories made us a better nation. As we made our documentary on the history of the national parks, Dayton and I played a thought experiment with each other. Imagine the United States without the national parks. Yosemite Valley could just as easily have become a gated community with a private golf course in its center. The rim of the Grand Canyon could be lined with trophy homes, each one with a KEEP OUT sign preventing you from gazing down into that awesome chasm and feeling connected to eons of time. The Everglades, with its abundantly diverse wildlife, could have been drained and made into shopping centers. Yellowstone could have become an amusement park called "Geyser World."

Fortunately, beginning in 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone as the world's first national park, your predecessors in previous Congresses pointed the arc of history in a different direction.

Even then, the struggles continued. Congress, history tells us, often found it easier to create national parks than to provide them with the resources--that is, funding--they need to operate well.

The progress has come, as it always does, in fits and starts. There have been many periods of Congressional neglect. At one point, the Army had to be deployed to protect Yellowstone and Yosemite, because federal money to administer them wasn't

forthcoming. In 1916, when the volcanoes in Hawaii and at Lassen Peak in California became national parks, Congress declined to appropriate any significant money for their development and protection, on the belief, one senator explained, that "it should not cost anything to run a volcano."

But there have also been moments when Congress has acted decisively. In the midst of the Great Depression, thousands of destitute young men found employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps to help them and their families survive by working to improve the national parks.

Following World War Two, when millions of reunited families loaded up in their station wagons and set out to enjoy the parks--and overwhelmed the facilities--Congress and the Park Service embarked on Mission 66 to build better roads and visitor centers to accommodate the crowds.

And I want to congratulate--and thank--many of you who last year passed landmark legislation--and funding--to address the infrastructure and maintenance backlog in the parks that had been growing for decades.

There's still more work to be done.

At the heart of the national park idea is the notion that every American--whether their ancestors came over on the Mayflower or whether they just arrived; whether they're from a big city or a farm; whether their father runs a factory or their mother is a maid--every American is a part-owner of some of the best seafront property in the nation; they own magnificent waterfalls and stunning views of majestic mountains and gorgeous canyons. They have a stake in making sure that, as Roosevelt said, these places "are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

You represent those people and are entrusted with protecting and nurturing this precious inheritance of theirs. I hope you take that responsibility seriously.

Let me conclude with a story from history that, I think, reverberates with today's situation.

About a decade after Yellowstone was set aside as the first national park and before any other national park had been established, the Senate actually debated whether this new park--this new idea--was worth keeping.

One Senator (I won't bother you with his name) rose in the chamber and proudly declared: "I should be very glad myself to see [it] surveyed and sold, leaving it to private enterprise." "The best thing that the Government could do with the



Yellowstone National Park," he argued, "is to survey it and sell it as other public lands are sold."

But Senator George Vest of Missouri answered him. "I am not ashamed to say that I shall vote to perpetuate this park for the American people," he said. "I am not ashamed to say that I think its existence answers a great purpose in our national life. There should be, [in] a nation that will have a hundred million or a hundred and fifty million people, a park like this as a great breathing place for the national lungs."

"A great breathing place for the national lungs." Nearly a century and a half later, in a nation of 330 million people emerging from the lockdowns and restrictions--and the terrible suffering, anxieties and exhaustion--caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our "national lungs" ache for great breathing spaces.

The national parks are still here to provide them. Thank you.

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Burns, that was beautiful. I think you have given us a new term that will go into use around here—"Geyser World". I think that is one we do not want to remember.

Our next witness is Shawn Bengé, who is the Acting Director of the National Park Service. As I mentioned, he has been with the Park Service for over 30 years.

Mr. Bengé, I do not envy you following Ken Burns, but give us an update on the status of the Park Service and the parks as of the beginning of the 2021 summer season.

**STATEMENT OF SHAWN BENGÉ, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

Mr. BENGÉ. Yeah, it's a hard act to follow, Senator.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of the park system, including the impacts of COVID-19 on operation staff, visitation, and facilities. The last 14 months have brought unprecedented challenges to our nation and to our national parks, but they've also shone a spotlight on the importance of parks as spaces for physical and mental health as well as places to reflect to who we are as Americans and who we want to be.

In the early weeks of the pandemic most parks closed their interior spaces but many retained some level of outdoor visitor access. While overall visitation dropped by roughly 28 percent systemwide, one-third of the national parks posted months with record visitation. A significant number of NPS employees have been on maximum telework during the pandemic, but law enforcement, custodial services, visitor services, research, restoration work, fee collection, and other operational work continues in the field. The employees of the National Park Service have shown remarkable ingenuity and flexibility in finding ways to protect resources and serve visitors during this public health crisis while also working to mitigate their own risk of exposures.

Parks are increasingly open this spring, though some operations will continue to be impacted by limited staffing resulting from public health mitigations. The NPS is proud to take a leadership role in the Department of the Interior's pandemic response through its close partnership with the United States Public Health Service. Among its many roles, the Public Health Service provides high-quality scientific advice on a range of new and evolving public health issues to protect and promote the health and well-being of visitors and employees. We expect that there will be significant increases in visitation in many parks as COVID mitigation measures are reduced, vaccination rates rise, and Americans increase their travel. Through the "Plan Like a Park Ranger" campaign that will be launched tomorrow, the NPS is encouraging the public to make plans in advance, be prepared and recreate responsibly. In April, the National Park Service released the first service-wide mobile app, which will assist visitors in planning their visit.

Reduced visitation and the temporary suspension of entrance fees in national parks beginning in March 2020 negatively impacted fee and concession revenues in FY20—combined loss of approximately \$125 million. At the same time, NPS saw some savings

as travel costs decreased by \$16 million and utility costs decreased by \$5 million. The NPS has incurred \$16.8 million in COVID-related expenses to date, principally related to supplemental staffing, extra cleaning and hygiene supplies, personal protective equipment, expanded telework capabilities, and virtual visitor experiences. We appreciate Congress's recognition of those impacts by making funding available through the CARES Act. Many of the concessioners and other commercial services in parks saw significant reduced operations in 2020, similar to trends in the broader hospitality and recreation industry. The NPS engaged in listening sessions with industry representatives to share and gather information, has worked with concessioners and commercial permit holders to provide relief, where possible, within the legal framework of concession contracts and commercial permits.

2020 was also a year in which issues around racial justice came to the forefront, including those related to policing. As of March 2021, the National Park Service has over 1,000 body-worn cameras in use at park units, and the National Park Service has worked to develop a robust body-worn camera program for all its officers, including the United States Park Police. The NPS intends to issue guidance to the field that would require all uniformed law enforcement officers to utilize body-worn cameras by the end of 2021. We are grateful to Congress for the recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, which represents an extraordinary opportunity for crucial investments in the infrastructure needed for people to have a safe and memorable experience when they visit parks. In FY21, \$1.3 billion from the Legacy Restoration Fund has been invested in 51 priority projects. We have also recently awarded \$150 million in LWCF funds to increase urban recreation opportunities through the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Grant Program.

We appreciate your ongoing support as you work to protect the special places under our stewardship and welcome visitors during a very challenging time. Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bengé follows:]

**STATEMENT OF SHAWN BENGE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE  
THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
NATIONAL PARKS, REGARDING THE STATE OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.**

**MAY 26, 2021**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of the National Park System, including the impacts of COVID-19 on operations, staff, visitation, and facilities.

As the Deputy Director of Operations for the National Park Service (NPS), it is a privilege to represent the approximately 20,000 dedicated employees of our workforce. One of the most rewarding parts of my job is reading the letters and emails that I receive from Americans who have visited national parks and want to share the life-changing and inspirational experiences they had during their trips. More often than not, these thoughtful messages single out individual NPS employees who went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that visitors feel welcome and have the best park experience possible.

**Impacts of COVID-19 on Park Operations**

During the last year, we have been reminded of the importance of public lands to the American people, who sought out open spaces where they could safely recreate. The NPS welcomed the public while working to mitigate COVID-19 exposure risks for visitors and staff alike.

As it did for people around the world, COVID-19 brought challenges to the NPS. In the early weeks of the pandemic, many parks closed their visitor centers and other indoor spaces, but retained some level of outdoor visitor access. The NPS Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan, released in May 2020, guided park operational decision making during this time, with the agency's primary posture to provide visitor access, particularly to outdoor spaces.

While a significant number of NPS employees have been on maximum telework during the pandemic, law enforcement, custodial services, visitor services, research, restoration work, fee collection, and other operational work continues in the field. The employees of the NPS have shown remarkable ingenuity and flexibility in finding ways to protect resources and serve visitors during this public health crisis, while also working to mitigate their own risk of exposure. Some of the new interpretive tools developed, including virtual tours of historic buildings and online interactive educational programming, will enhance the visitor experience for years to come. The NPS also utilized the hiring flexibilities authorized by OPM, which have allowed the NPS to bring on over 700 employees into positions that otherwise would likely have remained unfilled during the pandemic.

The NPS was proud to take a leadership role in the Department of the Interior's pandemic response through its close partnership with the US Public Health Service (USPHS). Among its many roles, USPHS provide high quality scientific advice on a range of new and evolving public health issues to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of visitors and employees. This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agreement signed between the USPHS and Stephen

Mather, the first NPS Director. We are grateful for this unique and important partnership, in which public health officers are assigned from the Department of Health and Human Services to serve our agency directly to promote, protect, and advance the health of our visiting public and employees. This partnership has been invaluable during the past 14 months.

In January, President Biden signed Executive Order 13991 to prioritize halting the spread of COVID-19 by relying on the best available data and science-based health measures. A NPS COVID Response Task Force, including representatives from relevant NPS programs as well as the USPHS, has been charged with developing policies consistent with new and evolving guidance. Though parks are increasingly open this spring, some operations will continue to be impacted by limited staffing resulting from public health mitigations, such as reduced occupancy of shared seasonal employee housing. Other sites will continue to limit specific activities, such as tours of historic structures, in order to facilitate physical distancing.

We expect that there will be significant increases in visitation at many units as COVID mitigation measures are reduced, vaccination rates rise, and Americans increase their travel. Many campgrounds and lodgings at busy parks are already completely booked for the summer, and some parks have instituted new reservation policies to facilitate physical distancing in popular areas. The NPS is encouraging the public to make plans in advance for their visit rather than showing up spontaneously. Through the #PlanLikeARanger campaign, we will launch tomorrow, the NPS is encouraging the public to make plans in advance, be prepared, and recreate responsibly.

Visitors now have a brand-new tool to assist them in their trip planning: the NPS Mobile App, released during National Park Week in April 2021. The development and ongoing maintenance of this app, which provides trip planning information for every National Park System unit, was supported by an appropriation of \$1 million. Linked to the NPS website, it ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. The app is built to be used even in remote parks where internet access may be limited, by allowing items to be downloaded to a visitor's phone in advance.

#### **COVID-19 Impacts to the NPS Budget**

From a budget perspective, COVID-19 resulted in unexpected costs to NPS operations throughout the system, and we appreciate Congress's recognition of these impacts by making funding available through the CARES Act. The NPS has incurred \$16.8 million in COVID-related expenses to date principally related to supplemental staffing, additional housing to facilitate physical distancing, extra cleaning and hygiene supplies, personal protective equipment, expanded telework capabilities, and virtual visitor experiences.

Reduced visitation and the temporary suspension of entrance fees to national parks beginning March 18, 2020, negatively impacted fee revenues in FY 2020 as compared to the previous year: recreation fee revenue was down 19%, and concession franchise revenue was reduced by nearly half, a combined loss of approximately \$125 million. On the other hand, some cost categories showed savings in FY 2020: NPS travel costs decreased by \$16 million, and utility costs dropped by \$5 million.

### **COVID-19 Impacts to Concessions and Other Park Partners**

In its mission to serve the public, the NPS collaborates with commercial and non-profit partners in a variety of relationships. Concessioners operate many visitor services in parks, including lodging, food services, gas stations, retail, marinas, equipment rentals, and more. Many of our concessioners have had reduced operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to trends in the broader hospitality and recreation industry. Impacts varied by location and type of service. For example, most marina and boat rental operations performed on par or better than 2019 levels. Conversely, at the Statue of Liberty, ferry services and food and beverage operations dropped by about 85%, and mountain climbing services on Denali were cancelled for the year. The NPS has worked with concessioners to provide relief where possible within the legal framework of concessions contracts, including offering to extend the term (i.e., duration) of eligible contracts and allowing for delayed payment of franchise fees.

The NPS also issues Commercial Use Authorizations (CUAs) for businesses that bring visitors into parks, from large multi-state tour operators to small family-owned guide services. CUAs are typically issued in one- or two-year increments park by park, so operators must apply for CUAs for each park in which they operate. The NPS has worked collaboratively with these companies to allow continued operations where feasible and took action to provide administrative relief for 2020 seasons by waiving new application fees for those business that were not allowed to operate during the entire 2020 season.

Over the last year, the NPS engaged in listening sessions with industry representatives, including members of the National Park Hospitality Association, America Outdoors Association, American Mountain Guides Association, and various bus and tour associations, to share and gather information. The NPS will continue this dialogue throughout this upcoming season to help us jointly plan for the 2021 season as public health recommendations evolve.

The NPS also has close relationships with non-profit partners that operate facilities and programs within parks such as bookstores and educational services. Philanthropic donations derived from the proceeds of such operations are a significant and critical source of funding to parks. Based on a recent survey by the Public Lands Alliance, cooperating associations representing 84% of park units have collectively lost about \$125 million in gross retail sales since March 2020. As of early May 2021, 33% of association retail stores remain closed and have no plans to reopen in the immediate future, and 44% of association staff have been laid off or had their hours reduced, despite participation in the Paycheck Protection Program.

While we anticipate significant domestic travel in the year to come, we understand that there will continue to be limitations on international travel, which will impact park visitation to many NPS units. Similarly, for parks whose visitors arrive by cruise ship or through tour companies that plan excursions up to a year in advance, visitation may still be impacted in 2021.

### **COVID-19 and the Economic Impact of Parks**

The “2020 Visitor Spending Effects Report” is anticipated to be published in June and will include data on jobs and economic spending relating to parks. It will show that NPS recreation visits dropped to a 40-year low, with a decrease of over 90 million recreation visits from 2019 – roughly a 27.6% drop in visitation. About 70% of that drop occurred April through July.

Despite these service-wide decreases, a third of our parks had at least one month of record visitation in 2020, as people sought the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors. Our urban parks, such as those in the Washington, D.C. area, experienced particularly high visitation.

**Looking Forward: Investing in our Future**

The NPS celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016 and is now focusing on investing in the future of our national parks and conservation programs for its second century.

The increased awareness around social equity and racial justice issues in 2020 helped to underscore the urgency of modernizing our law enforcement programs and meeting the expectations of the public we serve. Public trust and legitimacy are our top priorities, along with ensuring our officers are trained and equipped for the difficult work they do. Two recent efforts, which began before 2020, reflect these priorities.

Recently, the NPS recruited a class of law enforcement rangers that will start their careers at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, rather than having to pay for their own initial training prior to being hired. This removes a barrier to access for potential candidates. This innovative program was marketed widely to create a large and diverse applicant pool. Over 2,000 applications were received for the class of 24 participants. We expect programs such as this will help us to continue to recruit, hire, train, and retain a professional law enforcement workforce that reflects the diversity of America.

In order to enhance public transparency in law enforcement for community contacts, provide objective evidence, and document officers' actions while performing their duties, the NPS has worked to develop a robust body-worn camera (BWC) program for its officers. As of March 2021, the NPS has over 1,000 BWCs in use at park units. The United States Park Police (USPP) have not used BWCs previously but began implementing the program in the San Francisco Field Office on May 23, 2021. There will be a total of 41 USPP officers trained on camera usage in this first phase. NPS intends to issue guidance to the field that would require all uniformed law enforcement officers to utilize BWCs and a Digital Evidence Management System by the end of 2021.

The NPS is also modernizing its infrastructure. When Americans visit their parks, they expect to find high quality facilities. Many of the roads, trails, restrooms, water treatment systems, and visitor facilities in national parks are aging and strained by a level of use they were not designed to support. We are grateful to Congress for its recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which presents an extraordinary opportunity for crucial investments in the infrastructure needed for people to have safe and memorable experiences when they visit parks. Under the provisions of GAOA, the NPS receives 70% of the Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) — up to \$1.33 billion each year, or up to \$6.65 billion total, through 2025.

We are focused on making strategic investments across all of our funding streams to leverage opportunities that can help satisfy the ongoing need for operations and maintenance funding and maximize the benefit to the American public.

Infrastructure needs vary significantly by park, and most of the NPS's deferred maintenance (DM) is concentrated in a few dozen parks. In the fall of 2020, the NPS stood up the process to select and plan the initial Fiscal Year 2021 projects. These 51 priority projects span 37 parks and represent \$1.3 billion in investment, covering a range of categories including buildings and structures; recreational assets; water and utilities; transportation systems; and demolition. As project execution begins for FY 2021, NPS is simultaneously formulating priorities for FY 2022-FY 2025.

The much-needed funding infusion from GAOA will help us make meaningful progress in improving the condition of high priority assets, particularly by allowing us to address some of the largest and most expensive infrastructure projects. The LRF program is focused on reducing DM over the next five years, yet there remains an ongoing need for long-term maintenance, modernization, renewal, and operations support. We will continue to seek funding through line item construction, Federal Highways, and other programs, to ensure facilities, including roads, trails, and natural and cultural resources, are properly maintained and improved to meet code compliance for safety, sustainability, and accessibility for people with disabilities, and to meet current and future capacity needs.

GAOA also provided full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million a year. LWCF is vital to expanding recreational opportunities for all Americans, especially in communities where recreational opportunities may be limited. The LWCF-funded Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership grant program recently distributed \$150 million to local communities, enabling urban communities to create new outdoor recreation spaces, reinvigorate existing parks, and form connections between people and the outdoors in economically underserved communities. LWCF funding may also help further the Administration's goal to conserve 30 percent of the land and water within the United States by 2030 as envisioned in the President's America the Beautiful initiative.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, the last 14 months have brought unprecedented challenges to our nation and to our national parks, but they have also shone a spotlight on the importance of parks – as spaces for physical and mental health, as well as places to reflect on who we are as Americans, and who we want to be. We appreciate your ongoing support as we continue to evolve both the National Park System and the National Park Service to preserve these special places in so they will continue to be enjoyed by this and future generations.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for inviting me to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.



Senator KING. Thank you very much, Mr. Bengé.

David MacDonald is the President of Friends of Acadia, and the President of the National Park Friends Alliance, representing a very strong network nationwide of volunteer, non-governmental organizations that work with and strengthen the park system.

Mr. MacDonald, welcome and welcome to the Committee.

**STATEMENT OF DAVID MACDONALD,  
PRESIDENT AND CEO, FRIENDS OF ACADIA**

Mr. MACDONALD. Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines and other members of the Committee, thank you so much for the invitation to testify and for having the chance to add the perspective of partner organizations to this conversation here today.

I'm David MacDonald. I'm President and CEO of Friends of Acadia in Bar Harbor, Maine. We're a non-profit organization that for the last 35 years has been working to preserve and protect Acadia National Park and work with the surrounding communities as well. In that time, thanks to our incredibly committed members and volunteers, we've been able to grant approaching \$40 million to the park for a variety of projects, ranging from trail restoration, youth programs, climate change adaptation, you name it. It's a really strong partnership, and we're grateful for the incredible work of our colleagues at the Park Service here in Acadia.

You know, there are organizations like Friends of Acadia throughout the nation and all through this network and park system. They're not just like us. Some are larger, some are smaller, but it's a growing community and my other hat here today, as Senator King mentioned, is I chair the Steering Committee for the National Park Friends Alliance. We're an informal coalition that's growing dramatically—400 members strong—and these entities like to network, share best practices, and compare notes and lessons learned from our respective corners of the system and come together to work with this agency that we all have in common.

So my message to your Committee here today, coming from both a specific park like Acadia as well as this national view of partners, is that our parks have indeed become more important and more popular due to the pandemic. Likewise, the interdependence of the Park Service and partner organizations has also increased. We really must avail ourselves of every available tool and, in fact, we need to create a new tool kit for the coming months and years to ensure that parks are well-staffed, well-funded, they're preserved, the resources are taken care of, and we make them available for the visiting public for safe and rewarding experiences.

Having said that, let me touch on three primary themes of my testimony. First, the pandemic did put tremendous stress on park partner organizations with dramatic reductions in revenue, staffing, and operations. However, our community has been resilient and resourceful and we remain deeply committed to our mission of supporting parks and serving the expanding constituency that sought refuge out during the pandemic during this past year. Number two, national parks have unfortunately been under-resourced for decades. Park partners have been looked upon as an option to plug this gap. We sometimes talk about ourselves as providing a margin of excellence in parks. Over time, however, partner con-

tributions have increasingly had to provide a margin of survival. The pandemic revealed the risks of this shift and underscored the absolute importance of Congress maintaining and increasing the funding appropriated annually for the base operating budget of the National Park Service. My third point is, while funding is always important, in order to unlock the full potential of public-private partnerships with organizations like ours, we must also be willing to create a framework of policies, practices, and authorities at the Park Service and at Interior that encourage innovation, flexibility, and entrepreneurship that partners can often bring to the table. I want to thank Acting Director Benge for his support and encouragement in his time in his role.

The challenges ahead of us are great. These include the ability to make parks resilient to climate change, to make parks accessible and relevant to new or underserved audiences, to bring technology to bear to enhance a 21st century visitor experience or to solve the acute shortage of seasonal housing that's plaguing many gateway communities and really limits the park's ability to hire staff needed to run the parks. Here in Acadia, we're going to be short on lifeguards, trail workers, visitor service employees, all because the pandemic has exacerbated the housing market here. A few silver linings have emerged from the darkness of the past year, however. Partner organizations in parks have replaced traditional in-person events and programming with digital versions that have reached new and expanded and diverse audiences. Several folks have mentioned the tremendous bipartisan support behind the Great American Outdoors Act, providing historic levels of funding to address both long-deferred maintenance as well as land acquisition needs.

As with so many aspects of our lives in society, the pandemic has forced parks and partners to rethink how we do our work, how to deepen our impact and further our respective missions. In order to meet this moment that we face today—when nature and the outdoors and parks are central to many people's perception, their well-being, their health—it's really vital that the Park Service and partners recognize our increased interdependence, our respective strengths, and tap into each other's skills and assets in the months and years ahead. I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the conversation and all of us in the partner community look forward to being a resource for this Committee and the Park Service going forward.

Thank you so much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. MacDonald follows:]



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*Statement of David MacDonald – President, Friends of Acadia and  
President, National Park Friends Alliance Steering Committee*

*Before the National Parks Subcommittee of the  
United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Concerning “the State of the National Park System” May 26, 2021*

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and other honorable members of this subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you here this morning and to add the perspective of the park partner community to your discussion regarding the state of our National Parks, and in particular the challenges and opportunities arising from the past fifteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is David MacDonald and I have lived most of my life on Mount Desert Island, Maine, home to Acadia National Park. I currently serve as President and CEO of Friends of Acadia, a private, not-for-profit organization with 4,500 members that has worked in close partnership with the National Park Service since our founding in 1986. Our members love Acadia and are proud to give back to the park through our organization with philanthropic donations, thousands of hours of volunteer work on the trails, and as advocates for Acadia.

I also have the honor of serving as the current president of the National Park Friends Alliance Steering Committee, a coalition of more than 250 organizations from around the country that share best practices, new approaches, and coordinate on key issues affecting national parks. While each of these organizations is different and our members reflect the amazing diversity among the varied park units themselves, I hope that my remarks will also reflect the perspective and wisdom of other peers working in partnership with parks around the U.S.

My respectful message to your committee here today – coming from both a specific park like Acadia and from a national view of park partners – is that these special places are more important and more popular than ever following the pandemic year, and we must avail ourselves of every existing tool and also expand the toolkit with new partners and approaches to ensure that parks are adequately funded, staffed and made available to the American people for safe and rewarding experiences.

While I hope to share specific and tangible examples in the next few minutes and the questions and answers to follow, please let me emphasize three primary themes of my testimony at the outset:

- 1) The pandemic put tremendous stress on park partner organizations, with dramatic reductions in revenue, staffing and operations; however, our community has been resilient, resourceful and innovative and remains committed to our mission of supporting parks and serving the expanding constituency that sought refuge in parks during the past year;
- 2) National parks have unfortunately been under-resourced for decades. Park partners have been looked to as an option to help plug this gap either through private philanthropy or retail operations. While we once liked to describe our contributions as adding a “margin of excellence” in parks, over time, partner contributions have increasingly provided a “margin of survival” for some parks. The pandemic revealed the risks of this shift and underscored the absolute importance of Congress maintaining and increasing the funding appropriated for the base operating budget of the National Park Service.
- 3) While funding is important, to unlock the full potential of public-private partnerships with organizations like ours, we must also be willing to create a framework of policies, practices, and authorities that encourage the innovation, flexibility and entrepreneurship that partners can often bring to the table and that is needed in order to meet the complex challenges before us.

Our ability to make parks resilient to climate change; or to make parks accessible and relevant to new or underserved audiences; or to bring new technology to bear to alleviate overcrowding at iconic sites or enhance a 21<sup>st</sup> century visitor experience; or to solve the acute shortage of seasonal housing in many gateway communities that limits parks’ ability to hire the staff needed to operate – each of these will require a joint effort by parks, partners and surrounding communities.

*Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on park partner community:* Park partner organizations vary greatly in terms of their revenue models, programmatic offerings, and roles they play in their respective parks. Some organizations, like Friends of Acadia, rely exclusively on philanthropy; others, particularly cooperating associations, play a primary role in raising funds for parks through retail operations, such as bookstores, tour operations or other earned-income activities. Still other organizations are “hybrids,” generating funds through a combination of fundraising and park-related sales. All types of partner organizations were impacted by the pandemic and the deep shock-waves it had on the economy. While philanthropy bounced back in the second half of 2020, and many of us saw donors actually increase their giving in a time of need, those organizations relying on retail sales experienced devastating budgetary impacts, while visitor centers and stores remained closed and guided activities were eliminated or dramatically pared back. The federal Payroll Protection Program provided a lifeline to many of these organizations, but very few were immune from temporary or permanent layoffs and the need to reduce or suspend entirely their financial support to parks.

A few silver linings emerged from the darkness of the past year, however. Partner organizations replaced traditional in-person events or programming with digital versions that reached new and

more diverse audiences. Last year's phenomenon of more people seeking time outdoors and in parks and nature in the face of the pandemic combined with the ability for parks and partners to be more inclusive and reach new constituents by expanding virtual offerings creates a tremendous opportunity for us to build upon in the weeks and months to come. Now that visitor centers and stores are starting to re-open, cooperating associations are starting to see strong sales that are out-pacing pre-pandemic revenues. Finally, the tremendous bipartisan support and successful passage of the Great American Outdoor Act provides historic levels of funding to address long-standing deferred maintenance and land acquisition needs of parks and other conserved areas.

*Challenges and Opportunities Ahead:* As with so many aspects of our lives and society, the pandemic has forced parks and partners to rethink how we do our work and how to deepen our impact and further our respective missions. The past fifteen months saw millions of people relying on parks as places of refuge, solace, health, healing, and inspiration; parks emerged as something constant and reliable in people's lives when so many other touchstones were upended. In order to "meet this moment," the National Park Service and its partners must recognize our increased interdependence on each other and tap into our respective strengths to address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. These include:

- Bringing new tools and resources to bear to address issues such as hiring, contracting, project management, and shortage of housing that are vital to our ability to tap into the full potential of the Great American Outdoor Act and other funding opportunities;
- Ensuring that parks are places where diversity, equity and inclusion thrive in order to make the resources and benefits they offer available and welcoming to all; and to ensure that parks in turn benefit from the breadth of perspectives inherent in a wider audience.
- Tapping into rapidly-advancing innovations to help offer new solutions to growing challenges of over-crowding at the most heavily-visited parks.
- Making parks as resilient and healthy as possible in the face of our changing climate and models of sustainability that inspire visitors to do their part in helping address this global challenge.

Each of these will benefit from a partnership approach that leverages private philanthropy and nimbleness, while also underscoring the importance of the fundamental federal budgetary support. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share testimony with your committee today, and hope that you will not hesitate to let me know if I can assist with follow up questions or suggestions. Please know that the park partner community is ready and willing to be a resource for you in this important work.

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Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

I want to welcome Mr. Scott Socha, who represents the National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA). Almost all of our national parks have some concessions. A friend of mine runs a horse concession at Acadia and everything from, I guess, horse riding to hotels and other hospitality facilities.

Mr. Socha, your views, please.

**STATEMENT OF SCOTT SOCHA, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL PARK HOSPITALITY ASSOCIATION**

Mr. SOCHA. Good morning.

Thank you, Chairman King and Ranking Member Daines for the opportunity to share with the Committee our perspective on the state of the United States National Park System. Senator Daines, personally, I'm jealous of the nine inches of snow that you received last week in Bozeman.

I'm Scott Socha. I'm Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Park Hospitality Association. The Association represents small and large businesses that provide amenities and services to park visitors. In addition to my volunteer leadership role of NPHA, I'm Group President for Parks and Resorts and Travel at Delaware North, a hospitality business headquartered in Buffalo, New York. Delaware North operates in seven national parks and has a presence in Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. The members of NPHA wholeheartedly support the National Park Service mission to conserve our treasured parks for enjoyment, education, and inspiration. We have partnered with the NPS for more than 100 years.

By law, concessioner services have always been and will continue to be limited to necessary and appropriate services for visitors as determined by the agency. Services include lodging, food and beverage, recreation, Native American arts and crafts, guide services, and more. And the concession community includes leaders in the global hospitality industry, but perhaps more importantly, small businesses that are often multi-generational, very specialized to specific park units, typically in challenging locations, difficult conditions, and often distant from traditional labor markets. As the distinguished members of this Committee are well aware, 2020 was a very challenging year. Prior to the pandemic we anticipated revenues of nearly \$2 billion in the National Park System, \$150 million of franchise fees paid to the National Park Service, and employment levels of 25,000 people. But all the while, the complete and then partial closure of the parks led to a dramatic reduction in revenues, averaging 60 percent.

While some NPHA members were able to access economic recovery provisions covered in the COVID-19 relief legislation passed by Congress, meaningful direct assistance was limited. And because of this, more than 90 operators filed requests with the NPS for reductions in franchise fees as permitted in our contracts in the event of extraordinary, unanticipated changes to the business. And we're very happy to report that in late March 2021, NPS creatively offered a two-year contract lengthening to many NPHA members, which provided a critical lifeline. We thank the Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and the senior leadership of the

National Park Service for being a thoughtful partner in responding to COVID-19 challenges. While this relief helped many of our members, a few were shut out and we simply encourage the NPS to find ways to help those who continue having outstanding relief requests.

As we come out of the pandemic, we'll continue to adjust our operations, as needed, to protect public health and there are important lessons that we will continue to apply to our operations into the future. In addition to the pressing matters related to COVID-19, NPHA knows that implementation of the Concessions Management Improvement Act, enacted in 1998, deserves review. NPHA applauds recent NPS proposals to modify some regulations written more than 20 years ago and to make the park's concessions programs more responsive to visitors. NPHA worked closely with the NPS in recommending some of these changes and we look forward to working with NPS and the Department of the Interior on finalizing these important regulatory changes.

We would be incredibly remiss if we did not mention the steadfast work of the members of this Committee in the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. Deferred maintenance efforts pose threats to access, to the environment, and to the safety of visitors to the great outdoors. And GAOA will play a vital role in revitalizing our federal lands. NPHA is engaged with the National Park Service and supports leveraging our resources to not merely end the impact of past budgetary inadequacies but to implement new systems that will help prevent future deferred maintenance growth.

In closing, NPHA is incredibly enthusiastic about the future of national parks and we're encouraged by indications that an increasing number of Americans will explore these amazing and special places this coming summer. Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Socha follows:]

**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL PARK HOSPITALITY ASSOCIATION [NPHA] ON THE STATE OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM, A HEARING HELD BY THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES ON MAY 26, 2021, DELIVERED BY NPHA CHAIR SCOTT SOCHA**

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to share with the Committee our perspective on the state of the United States' National Park System.

I am Scott Socha, Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA). The association represents small and large businesses that provide amenities and services to park visitors. In addition to my volunteer leadership role of NPHA, I am Group President for Parks and Resorts and Travel for Delaware North, a hospitality and entertainment services company headquartered in Buffalo, New York. Delaware North operates in seven national parks and has a significant presence in and around Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. In addition to hospitality services in national parks, Delaware North is proud to partner with NASA in operating the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex.

The members of NPHA wholeheartedly support the National Park Service's (NPS) mission to conserve our treasured parks for enjoyment, education and inspiration unimpaired for this and future generations. As concessioners, we have partnered with NPS for more than 100 years to help all visitors safely access our parks.

Concessioners operate under agreements administered by NPS and obtained through a competitive process. By law, concessioner services have always been, and will continue to be, limited to "necessary and appropriate" services for visitors as determined by the agency. These services include lodging and food services, transportation, sale and rental of recreation equipment, souvenir sales including Native American art and crafts, guide and recreation services and more.

Concessioners include leaders in the global hospitality industry as well as small businesses that are often multi-generational and very specialized to specific park units. We typically operate in challenging locations and conditions, often distant from traditional labor markets and subject to seasonality, weather and wildfires. We are proud of the recognition concessioners have received from NPS and others for our commitment to world-class operations and environmental stewardship.

As the distinguished members of this Committee are aware, 2020 was a challenging year without precedent. Prior to the pandemic, we had predicted that total in-park concessioner annual revenue would near \$2 billion, that our corresponding franchise fee payments back to park units would near \$150 million, and that in-park employment would exceed 25,000 persons. COVID-19 had a major impact on National Park enjoyment by the American public. Concessioners took on key responsibilities for protecting the health of park visitors, our employees, staff of the National Park Service and other partners. All the while, the complete, and then partial, closures of the parks led to a dramatic reduction in revenues averaging 60%.

COVID-19's impact on concessioner operations varied significantly by park unit and type of service. The impact was greatest on businesses relying on international/long-haul travelers and guided/transportation related operations. While some NPHA members were able to access economic recovery provisions covered in the COVID-19 relief legislation passed by Congress, meaningful direct assistance was limited for most of our members. Because of this, more than 90 operators filed requests with NPS for reductions in franchise fee rates, as permitted in our contracts in the event of "extraordinary, unanticipated changes" to business. We recognize that the NPS is also experiencing financial impact



from COVID-19, including diminished receipts from concessions contracts which are typically related to a percentage of concessioner sales. Therefore, NPHA worked closely with the NPS to try and find solutions that would limit the impact to NPS's budget while providing struggling family run businesses with vital relief.

We are happy to report that, in late March 2021, NPS creatively offered a two-year contract lengthening to many NPHA members, which provided a critical lifeline for many concessioners. Our organization thanked Department of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland for being a thoughtful partner in responding to COVID-19 challenges, reflecting our shared goal of ensuring safe and accessible visitor experiences for all visitors to national parks. While this relief helped many of the NPHA members, a few were shut out and we encourage the NPS to find ways to help those who continue to have outstanding relief requests.

Looking to the upcoming summer, we are encouraged that Americans are excited to visit and explore our national parks. There is tremendous pent-up demand for travel to outdoor destinations. Concessioners are working closely with park superintendents and NPS leadership to adjust safety protocols and hospitality offerings as needed and on short notice. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further demonstrated the value of partnership between NPS and concessioners.

NPHA members have worked tirelessly with their local superintendents and NPS regional and national staff to ensure a safe and enjoyable summer season for everyone in our parks, including guests, NPS staff and concessioners' employees. We expect that as the pandemic continues to recede, we can continue to relax protocols in a responsible manner. I especially want to thank the park superintendents from across the country. They worked closely with us in a very difficult situation, and we appreciate their flexibility in trying to provide the best and safest guest experience.

As we come out of the pandemic, we will continue to adjust our operations as needed to protect public health and there are important lessons that we intend to apply to our operations. One area in need of review is employee housing in NPS units. There is acute need for safe and good quality in-park housing for employees of NPS, concessioners, and other partners. We believe that the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources should conduct an inquiry into the state of current in-park housing and encourage innovative ways to increase the quality of the housing stock. Simply put, additional and higher quality housing is needed to maintain adequate employment levels; and adequate employment levels are needed to ensure the safety of parks visitors.

In addition to the pressing matters related to COVID-19, NPHA notes that implementation of the *Concessions Management Improvement Act*, enacted in 1998, deserves review. NPHA applauds recent NPS proposals to modify some regulations written more than 20 years ago to make the parks' concessions programs more responsive to visitors. NPHA worked closely with NPS in recommending some of these changes and we look forward to working with the NPS and Department of Interior on finalizing these important regulatory changes.

We would also be remiss if we did not mention the steadfast work of members of this committee in the passage of the *Great American Outdoors Act* (GAOA). NPHA members actively supported this important legislation. It represents a commitment to continue our legacy of protecting vital places for all time, and for caring better for these special treasures. GAOA will play a vital role in revitalizing our parks, national forests, wildlife refuges and more. Deferred maintenance efforts pose threats to access, to the environment and to the safety of visitors to the great outdoors. NPHA is engaged with NPS and supports

leveraging our resources to not merely end the impact of past budgetary inadequacies, but to implement new systems that will prevent future deferred maintenance growth.

In closing, NPHA is enthusiastic about the future of national parks and, we are encouraged by indications that an increasing number of Americans will explore these spaces this summer.

Thank you.

Scott Socha, Chair  
National Park Hospitality Association

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Socha.

Let me begin questioning.

Mr. Bengé, what is the status of the Park Service plans for this year with regard to COVID in terms of any kind of limitations, mask requirements, those kinds of things? What is the plan for 2021?

Mr. BENGÉ. Thank you, Senator, for that question. I appreciate it.

I think it's important to recognize it's an extraordinarily and dynamic environment as the progression of the disease changes and we're certainly in a different place today than we were a month or two or three months ago. Obviously, our guidance is framed by the Executive Orders of the President, by DOI policy, and by OPM and OMB guidance. In looking forward and thinking about our ability to welcome visitors, I think we're like any other enterprise. There are probably very few businesses that are operating in the same way, at the same level they were pre-COVID, but everyone is on a glide path in a better direction.

We have 423 units in the National Park Service, and we're extraordinarily decentralized. Every park is different in terms of where they are in being operational and what they need to be operational. We do believe there are some parks where visitation will increase and we need to do what we need to do in order to be ready. The "Plan Like a Park Ranger" is a campaign that will target trip planning. This will include messages around safety, alternative parks that might be less crowded, and making sure you have a reservation before you leave out. Real-time messaging on congestion is also a tool so you know the parking lot is full before you get there. And in some cases, we're also considering timed entry and limiting numbers.

Senator KING. Will decisions on things like masks be made on an individual park basis or has the Department made a determination based upon CDC guidelines that that will not be necessary this summer?

Mr. BENGÉ. We currently are operating under DOI and OPM—OMB guidance, which is certainly framed by CDC. So it's a changing environment. Currently, if you're vaccinated, you know, you're not required to wear a mask if you're an employer or a visitor in the park.

Senator KING. Thank you.

One point that I want to make, and it is awkward to make this point to the Acting Director, but we need a permanent director. The Park Service has not had a director for, I think, five years and I hope that is something that is under active consideration in the Department.

Mr. BENGÉ. Thank you, Senator.

No one will be happier when we get a permanent director than I will be.

[Laughter.]

Mr. BENGÉ. And I understand Shannon Estenoz in her testimony indicated that would be our priority. So I'm confident that the Administration is actively working.

Senator KING. Ken Burns, a question for you. You documented the beauty and the transcendent nature of these parks around the

country, but one of the problems we are encountering as a kind of inherent tension of loving places to death where some of the best places—you cannot see them, but in our Committee room we have pictures of beautiful parks, but we also have pictures of huge traffic jams in places like Acadia and Yosemite. How do we balance public access to the maximum number of Americans with not compromising the experience by virtue of all those Americans coming to visit their parks?

Mr. BURNS. Thank you, Senator King.

This is a fundamental question, one we tried to address when our series came out in 2009. It's a difficult one because the parks need to have their constituencies. If there was nobody there and we had none of these problems, chances are the parks would then come under assault from the very American acquisitive nature of things. I look at the lines when I go as a citizen much the same way that I look at a line standing in my little town in New Hampshire to vote. It means that we are participating in the fullest sense in this democracy. As I said in my testimony, this Declaration applied to the landscape, but I think a good deal of the park planning and the release of the deferred maintenance gives us a chance to reinvigorate—maybe not on the scale as Mission 66 did—in reimagining the parks, but maybe we have an opportunity to—once again, another generation later, 50 plus years afterwards—to have a new kind of mission that permits us to begin to handle and I think digital technology will help as the Acting Director suggested, just knowing that that parking lot ahead of you is full or knowing that that dining room is full, that we have a chance to, as families, as individuals, but also as a country to figure out how best to accommodate all the people.

But as I told my impatient daughters waiting for a herd of buffalo to go by in Yellowstone, this was a good line to be in.

Senator KING. Thank you. This is an issue where I think we may have a hearing devoted to just this question of how to disperse our visitors between parks and also within parks in order to relieve this problem.

Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bengé, our gateway communities are a vital part of our park system, and ensuring strong partnerships there is very critical. What were your takeaways from the last year and what steps do you think the Park Service needs to strengthen the relationships between our parks and the gateway communities?

Mr. BENGE. Well, thank you, Senator, I couldn't agree more.

We understand the interdependency between parks and gateway communities and strive to be good neighbors and partners with these communities. The National Park Service leadership and individual park managers continue to look for ways to work together with our gateway community leaders on issues that affect the quality of life of gateway community residents, park employees, and park visitors. This includes public health issues, issues such as traffic flow, parking, event planning, affordable housing, and schools. I do think we do a very good job in that space, Senator.

Senator DAINES. Thank you.

Mr. Bengé, and I share the Chairman's sentiment that we are grateful that Yellowstone National Park is not called Geyser World. I believe that Yellowstone National Park, and this is the park that—you know, I grew up in the shadows of, literally as a kid in Montana over many, many years—they have made a lot of great improvements in employee housing. We can only recruit and retain our very best employees if we have adequate housing and places for them to live. As we come out of this pandemic and out of the day-to-day activities that some are becoming more normal now, how do we ensure our national park employees across the United States are supported and taken care of?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator. Related to housing, you know, the NPS follows the requirements of the housing program that are set forth by OMB. NPS employees are expected to live in private-market housing unless they perform duties that make them required to live in the park or when affordable housing is not available nearby. We have made it a goal within the National Park Service to eliminate poor housing that exists in terms of quality of housing. I think Yellowstone is a great example of where we have invested a significant amount of money over the last three years. And if memory serves me right, we've replaced over 40 units in that particular park and we're committed to that program in meeting that five-year goal of eliminating poor housing in the Park Service.

Affordable housing—it is becoming increasingly difficult to find in gateway communities and I certainly understand that and appreciate that situation. I think there are probably parks—or not probably—there are parks where additional housing we'll need is required. I think we need to be extraordinarily thoughtful on a park-by-park basis in understanding what that need is and then being able to address that need, which can include and should include public-private partnerships.

Senator DAINES. Yes. I talked with them a bit, in fact, we had a field hearing of the Park Subcommittee in Gardner, Montana—one of our gateway communities there for Yellowstone National Park—about this very issue. In fact, we had it at the Gardner High School. We have gateway communities for Yellowstone Park that are in Montana, a place like Gardner, West Yellowstone, Cook City, where they are surrounded by federal lands and they are literally landlocked and unable to expand. So we have a constraint on ground where we could build additional housing. It is really very difficult to recruit talent both in the community and at the park as housing prices are high and new houses just simply cannot be built—there is just—we are out of land.

Starting with Mr. Bengé, but I am also happy to hear input from any others on this topic, what options or solutions might we examine to ensure that the parks and the communities can continue to hire and house and retain the best talent?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator. Again, I think it's different in each park in terms of need. I think making sure that we have the appropriate planning and analysis in place to understand what the need is in being able to cross-walk that with the existing inventory is incredibly important. Once we have determined what that need is, I think there are a number of avenues of which we can fill that

need. I think one of the things that's nice in that space is that our housing regulations allow for the concept of public-private partnerships in being able to build facilities by the private sector and there are some constraints related to that authority, but I think it's something we need to explore in those situations where it makes sense.

Senator DAINES. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I am out of time, but it is something I think we need to examine is that, we have—we love our parks. We have to take care of our employees. We are out of housing right now in some cases. Something we should look at.

Senator KING. I think that is a subject for perhaps some hearing time.

Senator DAINES. Yes. Thank you.

Senator KING. Thank you.

Mr. Bengé, I should have, in my introductory comments, commented on your people. In 2003, my wife and I took our children out of school for five and a half months and toured the country by RV and went to 17 national parks and the people were exceptional. The park rangers, the park personnel, we have wonderful people and I think a lot of them are mission driven. They clearly were proud of where they were. They were proud of the mission and I hope you will convey to them, to the people of the Park Service, the admiration, respect, and thanks that this Committee knows is due to them. Please do that, please, will you?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator, I would be happy to do that. We have over 18,000 very dedicated employees that are absolutely mission driven.

Senator KING. We did not see all of them, but we saw quite a few of them on that trip.

Now we have Senator Hirono, by WebEx.

Senator.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, you and I, I think, are the only two people on this Subcommittee who have this Senior Pass to our national parks. Mr. Chairman, you are the person who flashed this and I said "I want one of those" and the minute I went back to Hawaii I got one—

Senator KING. It is the best deal in America.

Senator HIRONO. Right. There are some benefits to getting more mature.

Mr. Burns, thank you so much. You are shining a light on the importance of our national parks and your documentary, I watched it and it really made everyone, I think, aware of the importance of our national parks. So your presence on this panel is really welcome. Mahalo, as we say in Hawaii.

And Mr. MacDonald, I want to acknowledge also the importance of the Friends Groups and cooperating associations in their roles in supporting the National Park System, both financially and in-kind services.

I have a number of questions for Mr. Bengé. While the COVID pandemic has had significant impacts on National Park Service that will take some time to recover from, another crisis is facing our National Parks and that is climate change. Last month, the National Park Service published a document providing guidance to

park managers on planning for climate change and the document provides examples of how parks all across the country are planning for those impacts, including at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, where efforts are underway to establish populations of rare and endangered plant species to increase their ability to persist as climate conditions change.

As NPS works to incorporate planning and carrying out the subsequent projects to address climate change, what kind of additional resources will be necessary to ensure that efforts like those in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park will happen?

Mr. BERGE. Thank you, Senator.

You know, we are in the perpetuity business, but I think it's fair to say that our parks are influenced and are changing in terms of the resources we're charged with protecting as a result of a changing climate. We understand that being able to forecast, understand those impacts, do what we can on the resiliency side, and also be able to protect the resources are our priority. We have spent a significant amount of time and energy looking particularly at coastal parks in terms of vulnerability and we want to expand that information, that research to our parks, every park, so every park has that information in order to be able to use in making good decision-making related to management decisions on resource protection.

Senator HIRONO. Well, the question is, Mr. Benge, do you need additional resources to enable this work to continue—particularly, as you say, in the coastal parks?

If you say yes, we can look for some funding or other changes that we need to make.

Mr. BERGE. Yes, thank you, Senator.

It is a priority and a pillar for the current Administration related to climate change and I think, as a priority, resources would be made available as a result of the Administration's priorities. In terms of additional money that we need today that we don't have, I'm really not in a position—I didn't come with that information.

Senator HIRONO. Okay.

Mr. BERGE. Thank you. But I'd be happy to provide it.

Senator HIRONO. Yes, usually the need exceeds the resources provided.

Mr. Benge, as you know, Haleakala National Park has been successfully using a reservation system to ensure a safe and enjoyable visitor experience for viewing the sunrise from the rim of the volcano, something that I have also done. Many parks during the pandemic tried new reservation and time entry systems to better manage their flow of visitors into the parks. So I am wondering—and this is something that the Chairman had also referred to, or I think he did—are there things like the “Plan Like a Ranger” campaign that NPS is launching where you encourage parks to continue pursuing these new systems beyond the pandemic in order to decrease overcrowding and pressure on resources?

Mr. BERGE. Thank you, Senator.

I think the short answer, yes, in terms of trip planning, there is plenty of opportunity on that front beyond the pandemic. When it comes to managing visitors and congestion management, our goal, our ultimate goal is to provide a quality visitor experience and make sure that we're doing a good job in protecting resources for

future generations. Any action that we take in managing people is really measured against those two principles. For example, do we have too many people that the quality of experience is severely compromised in any particular area or are resources being damaged as a result of too many people?

The management actions that we can or do take vary greatly based on the individual circumstances. It could range from proactively encouraging visitors to visit less crowded areas through trip planning that would provide similar experiences all the way to implementing a sophisticated time entry system. Typically, we go through a very comprehensive planning process at the park level that includes pretty robust specific engagement to identify that range of management options before we make those decisions in the long-term.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. I think it is really important that these decisions are not made as a top-down kind of a process.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator KING. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Before recognizing Senator Lee, I hope and believe that online watching us this morning is our member emeritus, Lamar Alexander, who lives in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He told me he was going to tune in this morning. One of the real authors of the Great American Outdoors Act, and I just want to acknowledge Senator Alexander's contribution to the work that we are doing here today.

Senator Lee.

Senator LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Bengé, as you know, Zion National Park operates a fleet of shuttles to provide people with access to the park. As a result of COVID-related policies, currently these park shuttles are limited to about 30 percent capacity—about 14 people at a time and this is something that is dramatically decreasing the number of people who can travel on them at any given time. The park, Zion National Park, is as you know, entering into a really busy season. Local communities—especially the city of Springdale is one—rely heavily on the shuttle system to moderate traffic and parking within the town. So when we look at the fact that airline passengers have been sitting shoulder-to-shoulder for hours at a time on flights for many months, I wonder why it is that passengers wearing masks couldn't—in a short shuttle ride, one in which they could open the windows—why is it that they should have to operate at 30 percent capacity?

So answer me this. Can the Park Service update its social distancing guidance on this point?

Mr. BENGÉ. Park service policy, again, is guided by Department of the Interior policy as well as OMB and it is framed by CDC recommendations.

Senator LEE. I understand.

Mr. BENGÉ. So the, sort of—the answer to your question is we—it's a very dynamic environment. I mean, it's very likely a month from now it will look different in terms of what those policies look like today versus a month from now, but right now, we are framed by the policies of the Department.



Senator LEE. I understand and I appreciate that and I appreciate the fact that the Biden Administration has reiterated its commitment to following the science. But can you explain to me what science it is that would indicate that it is safe to fly shoulder-to-shoulder for hours at a time but not ride shoulder-to-shoulder equally massed in both circumstances for a 10 to 15 minute bus ride? What's the scientific distinction between those?

Mr. BENGE. Senator, I just don't think I'm the right person, from a scientific standpoint, to have the expertise to answer your question.

Senator LEE. Okay.

One of the reasons that this worries me is because we are entering the busy season. This coming Monday being Memorial Day is going to be a particularly popular weekend. So is there any chance you could make that adjustment prior to Memorial Day?

Mr. BENGE. If the policy guidance changes between now and Memorial Day as it relates to OMB and/or the Department, we certainly would evaluate that and pivot accordingly.

Senator LEE. Okay, thank you.

The drought that Western states, including my own, have been experiencing is impacting the water level at Lake Powell in the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. In fact, the water level has gotten so low that it has left both the channel ramps at Antelope Point Marina unusable, cutting off access to concession customers and to dry-storage patrons. Meanwhile, the Bull Frog State Line and Wahweap ramps will all need temporary extensions. I certainly want to commend and thank the local park officials for working expeditiously to address the issue. As we look ahead, Mr. Benge, how do you think we can better prepare for these types of situations?

Mr. BENGE. Well thank you, Senator.

Glen Canyon, I think, welcomes about 4.4 million visitors annually. We are in the middle of a historic drought. No one can predict exactly when it will end or how severe it will be. We are committed to using the most accurate scientific data available to make the best decisions possible. I think it was on May 17th we notified Lake Powell boaters that the Stateline Launch Ramp will be closed to motorized vehicles due to revised projections by Bureau of Reclamation and lake levels are lowering faster than previously predicted.

Alternative launching facilities for motorized vehicles remain in place. We're working with the public and the recreation community to plan ahead as congestion at boat ramps and docks on Lake Powell occurs and its water levels drop, but without question, it is a difficult situation.

Senator LEE. Okay.

As the third most visited national park in the entire country, Zion National Park is, as I indicated earlier, it is important to our state and it is a fixture of a local tourism economy. It is one that really helps support tourism and it helps generate resident revenue. At various times the Park Service has sought to conduct a capacity study that could end up mandating a reservation system. I just want to take this moment to reiterate my very, very strong opposition to any reservation system and instead request that the National Park Service give consideration to locally driven alter-

native solutions that prepare visitors and that preserve visitor access and enjoyment.

So Mr. Bengé, will you commit to collaborating with my office and communities in my state as we help to address system unit needs?

Mr. BENGE. Absolutely, Senator. Thank you.

Senator LEE. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator KING. Thank you, Senator Lee.

Senator Kelly.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Burns, great seeing you again, remotely. I would like to begin by thanking you for your impressive and inspiring PBS documentary about the National Parks—"National Parks: America's Best Idea". In it you covered some of the history of the Grand Canyon National Park in the State of Arizona and it has been 10 years since my last flight to space, on Space Shuttle Endeavor, but I will never forget the first time I saw the Grand Canyon from orbit. Even from hundreds of miles away, it is impressive and majestic, as impressive as it is when you see it up close.

Today, there are thousands of uranium-mining claims surrounding the park. Senator Sinema and I introduced the Grand Canyon Protection Act, which would permanently protect the area from uranium mining. We believe the risk of uranium contamination to Grand Canyon water supplies, the tourism economy it supports, and the Havasupai Tribal members who live there, is too great. A recent poll by Colorado College found that 77 percent of Arizonans support banning uranium mining near the park, and the latest that was recently in some public research.

What do you think? What is your opinion and what do you think causes Arizonans and Americans to rally to protect our national parks?

Mr. BURNS. Well, it's good to see you again too, Senator Kelly, if virtually.

You know, I'm reminded of the phrase in Ecclesiastes, "What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again. There's nothing new under the sun." As you know, one of the principal reasons why President Theodore Roosevelt set aside 800,000-plus acres of Grand Canyon first as a national monument—it would then gain national park status several years later—was to protect it from mining interests. And I think what you find is an overwhelming number of Americans who support, particularly with those existing national parks, the greatest possible protection, protection that we presume they enjoy. And I think many Americans are surprised to see that there are still threats.

But again, I would retreat back to my democratic analogy that the freedoms that we enjoy require a kind of eternal vigilance, and I think it's going to be important for those of us who advocate for the protection of the parks, those of us who would want, for example, to expand them. Senator Lee, I was speaking for many years with Senator Hatch about Dinosaur and Dead Horse—Dead Horse, a state park in Utah—achieving some sort of park recognition or status, national park recognition or status, and elevating Dinosaur to that level, that we're constantly in flux and doing that and part of our relationship to the parks, as citizens, has to be in the ongo-

ing vigilance to protect them from—as I mentioned before in my testimony, or in my answer—the acquisitive interests that are natural to all human beings and to people. There’s nothing new under the sun and these uranium claims have been going on for, literally, more than a century.

Senator KELLY. Well, thank you, Mr. Burns, and I think that vigilance is incredibly important here and I want to thank my senior Senator, Senator Sinema, for introducing the Grand Canyon Protection Act with me because the uranium mining in and around the Grand Canyon is just a bad idea.

In the remainder of my time, I want to switch to Mr. Bengé. National Parks in Arizona need over \$500 million in repairs and replacements in critical infrastructure. One example of this is the drinking water pipeline built in the 1960’s that takes water from the Colorado River to the South Rim. When the 12-mile pipeline fails, which is rather frequent, the park and its visitors lose water. And the National Park Service will soon receive substantial funding provided for deferred maintenance projects under the Great American Outdoors Act that was signed into law last year.

Mr. Bengé, can you confirm that the Park Service is moving forward with plans to replace the Grand Canyon pipeline and do you foresee any roadblocks ahead in getting this pipeline completed?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator. Short answer, yes, we’re committed and no, I see no roadblocks.

Senator KELLY. Thank you.

Senator KING. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Well thank you, Chairman. It is great to be here doing something fun and working on it together and I want to just thank the Chairman for guiding me to Acadia National Park a couple of years ago. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. MacDonald and I will give him my first question—the Friends of Acadia. And if I would sit here, like you, my wife has a goal of going to every national park in the country, which means that is my goal as well and with all due respect to all the other parks, I am not sure if I have been to a more beautiful park than Acadia, as well as—Yellowstone gets all the ink—but really Glacier National Park—I have been there three times and just two of America’s treasures.

As I think about coming out of COVID, one of my big concerns is the mental health crisis. As a physician, if I could give America a prescription this summer to work on your mental health, it would be “Go visit a national park.” Take a deep breath, go to a national park. It would do more than any medicine or any legislation that we can write up here. So I just want to get America out there.

I will start with Mr. MacDonald. You guys have been so successful, private world mingling with the government park there as well. As the Friends of Acadia, actually I believe it was the first park that used private funds as well. What is the secret to your success? What would you pass on to other non-profit organizations that want to work with national parks?

Mr. MACDONALD. Thank you, Senator.

We have learned so much from our other peers at other parks. This is one of the benefits of the Friends Alliance. I’m pleased by your remarks that you consider Friends of Acadia a leader in this regard. There is a long tradition of private philanthropy here at

Acadia. Mr. Burns and his film documented how Acadia was the first park created through private donations of land and that tradition is still incredibly strong.

It does come back to relationships and communication and trust and respect. It's not easy, always, for a federal agency to work outside of their comfort zone or outside the park boundary, but stretching to include partners in your plans, partnering whenever you tackle a major initiative, agreeing on priorities, that collaboration and communication needs to be wired into the future leaders of the Park Service. We have a terrific superintendent here. There are many out there that are doing a great job, but being willing to communicate and share the work and share the priorities with the community and with the parks and to problem-solve together and to have the ability to, you know, just tap into people's desire to give back. The parks provide so much to the American people and organizations like ours just provide a platform for folks to be able to pay it back.

So grateful for your interest and support. Please let us know when you are back in Acadia and let me know if I can help with other questions.

Senator MARSHALL. Well thank you. I will go to Mr. Benge next.

Perhaps the greatest bargain in America is \$80 for a National Park Pass, and I just noticed that mine has expired, so I need to get another one. How do people get a National Park Pass?

Mr. BENGE. They can go to the National Park website and follow the link to the pass.

Senator MARSHALL. So the national website for the parks as well. And we have seniors. Do we have anything special for veterans yet, a special park pass?

Mr. BENGE. For veterans, yes.

Senator MARSHALL. So they get a deduction or is it free for them?

Mr. BENGE. It's free.

Senator MARSHALL. Free, wow, what a great bargain and one more way to pay tribute to our veterans as well.

I think I want to go to Mr. Socha next.

As you get geared up for what I think will be the busiest summer we have ever had—my—I just see the enthusiasm out there, all my outdoors friends, the people that have never tasted the outdoors are ready to go. The fishing equipment is sold out at all the stores and it looks like it is going to be a great summer. How are you all doing for employees and why—I am guessing you are being challenged getting people to work, like everybody is in the country? What is keeping people from coming to work for your folks this summer?

Mr. SOCHA. Sure. It certainly is a very tight labor market right now, without question. We're, no doubt, leveraging H2Bs and J1s—international workers—because there's a real need for it. We're offering incentives that we haven't offered in the past in order to retain workers—and I say retain, as well as recruit new—super important, but we believe we're ready. We're excited and we have some great partnerships out there, Yellowstone, in particular, just a great superintendent to partner with.

Senator MARSHALL. Well great. It looks like I am out of time, so I'll yield back. Thank you for being here, everybody.

Senator KING. Senator Marshall, you mentioned your pass is a bargain. This is my senior pass, which is \$80 for life. So this, I think, as Senator Hirono, this is the greatest deal in America right here.

I think it is \$80. Is that right, Mr. Bengé? I think?

Mr. BENGE. That is correct.

Senator KING. It used to be a ridiculous \$10, but in any case. That is when I bought mine, as a matter of fact.

I think we'll have a short second round of questions.

Mr. Socha, you mentioned something in your testimony that sort of went by very quickly, but I think is important and that is that it is time to review the 1998 Act that governs how concessions work. For example, we learned through experience at Acadia that if a concessionaire bids for the—whatever the service is, past performance doesn't matter under the regulations. Do you agree that it is time to review that Act and the regulations in light of current realities of park operations?

Mr. SOCHA. I do. We spent, collectively, 2 years between ourselves and the National Park Service to progress it very far down the line to have it placed in the reading room and have it never make it out of the reading room. Since then, we've had conversations with the National Park Service as to how we can progress it forward, if there are any changes that need to be made to what we all have collectively come up with.

Senator KING. Well, I think that is something that this Committee will follow up on this year.

Mr. SOCHA. Thank you.

Senator KING. Mr. Bengé, this is too long a question for a short hearing like this. I would appreciate it if the Department could supply to this Committee for the record current plans and operational procedures for the implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act. How are the decisions made in terms of allocation of funds to various parks? How are decisions made with regard to allocation of funds under the Land and Water Conservation Fund? I think that would be a useful update for the Committee given the fact that we are approaching a year since the bill was passed. Can you work with your colleagues at the Department to make that available?

Mr. BENGE. I will, Senator, thank you.

Senator KING. Thank you very much.

The other thing, Mr. Bengé, I hope that the Department, the National Park Service, will work to further online access. If there is anything we have learned during the pandemic, it is the importance of an online presence, both in terms of park passes, park guides, information, real-time information about parks, you mentioned congestion information. I think there is some progress to be made in terms of the digital footprint of the National Park Service. I hope that is on the agenda as well.

Mr. BENGE. Yes, it's on the agenda. It's one of the priorities we're working on. We are proud that we just recently rolled out our first mobile app, which certainly is a step in the right direction.

Senator KING. Yes sir. Thank you.

Mr. MacDonald, in terms of advisory, I am sorry, in terms of organizations like Friends of Acadia, what about advisory commit-

tees, which I think are a kind of different animal? Are they a useful part of the park administration process?

Mr. MACDONALD. Thank you, Senator King.

I think they are. Any opportunity to provide a forum for local communities, local elected officials to have a say, and to have questions and to have a healthy exchange on issues affecting the park. Having said that, I know that some of the administration of the advisory commission here at Acadia, how you nominate someone for a term, you know, the paperwork they have to file, you know, that can be a little frustrating I know, but the concept of a local advisory commission, I think, is very sound and it helps strengthen that trust and communication that I mentioned between the park and the surrounding communities.

Senator KING. Thank you.

Mr. MACDONALD. I also just want to add on the earlier topic about the Great American Outdoors Act. There is a lot going on and I do want to credit the Park Service for including the partner community in their communications. They are working night and day to implement this. It's a very big lift and I do appreciate—the partner community appreciates being kept in the loop as those decisions are being made and rolled out.

Senator KING. Mr. Burns, before my time expires I want to thank you again for joining us and for the work you did on behalf of the National Parks to introduce not only Americans, many Americans, millions of Americans, but people around the world to this wonderful asset and I hope you will keep in touch with this Committee as ideas occur to you that you believe could be helpful. I think the other important contribution you made was that the parks have not been without controversy and many of them were born in controversy, and yet today, many of those communities where controversies existed could not imagine life without the park. Has that been your experience?

Mr. BURNS. Very much so, Senator and I'd be honored to stay in touch and offer what advice the Committee would find useful. You're exactly right. I think too often we presume that these good things were born out of equally good things, but it's often the tension about what to do with the land. That acquisitive nature looks at a stand of beautiful forest and thinks board-feet. It looks at a beautiful river and thinks dam. Looks at a canyon, Senator Kelly, and thinks mineral rights. And all of that is legitimate and an important part of the growth of our country, but some of it has to be saved, as President Roosevelt had suggested for our posterity and I think it's important.

I also want to commend Senator Marshall for bringing up the idea of mental health. Let's remember that the very first Park Service Director, Stephen Mather himself, suffered from some mental illness in which only the parks and their soothing nature had some way of calming this inner turmoil. He was absent for a long time. His assistant director, Horace Albright, often took over. Just a decade after Yellowstone was created there was a debate about whether we should continue with this and many senators suggested not. George Vest of Missouri said "There should be in a nation that will have", he said, "100 million or 150 million people, a park like this", meaning Yellowstone, "as a great breathing place

for our national lungs". A great breathing place for our national lungs. Nearly a century and a half later in a nation of more than 330 million people, now emerging from the lockdown and restrictions and the terrible suffering and anxiety and exhaustions that accompanied that, we need a place for our national lungs to be exercised and you can find that in only one place and that is in our national parks and our national park system and the extraordinary work that the National Park Service does.

I'm very grateful to the Committee for asking me to come this morning to offer thoughts about the historical perspective of how incredibly democratic this institution is.

Senator KING. Thank you very much, Mr. Burns.

Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Burns, your documentaries helped bring to light the beauty of so many of our parks. When visitors come to Montana and visit some of our great parks, oftentimes they will look at maybe a Yellowstone and Glacier kind of itinerary, but as the Chairman pointed out earlier, we have congestion issues in our parks and need to find ways here to maybe relieve some of those pressures. One of those ideas, perhaps, is to encourage visitors to think about some of our lesser-known parks. They may look at their itineraries.

My question is, how could we use your tools and your knowledge to highlight and drive visitation to some of these lesser-known parks in Montana? An example—the Grant-Kohrs Ranch. We had a field hearing there actually a couple years ago. Or some of our battlefields, like Little Bighorn, the Big Hole, and Bear Paw.

Mr. BURNS. Senator, this is a wonderful, wonderful question and really at the heart of it and I'm grateful for the chance to try to answer it. You know, I've spent my entire professional life working in public broadcasting and I've always seen a kind of similarity or comparison to our federal system and to the National Park System and what we try to do in public broadcasting. And we've created a lot of educational materials that have accompanied our national parks film and even though it has now been out for a dozen years it nonetheless is a very active site and we work through the PBS learning media to continue to educate. So we would be more than happy to go back to the Park Service and certainly work in concert with your Committee to try to coordinate that information because we do need a place, a safety valve as well as a breathing for our national lungs and a lot of that has to do with, sort of, intelligent ways of visiting the parks. And we've all experienced the logjams at Glacier or at Yellowstone, but I think the wonders of Big Hole and Bighorn are incredibly important and I think we can direct our populous there through educational works. And I know, speaking on behalf of the Public Broadcasting Service, that we would be happy to try to share our materials and understanding.

In fact, when we finished collecting the thousands and thousands of photographs necessary to research over a decade, Senator, we donated the entire hard drive of those archives to Harper's Ferry where the Park Service has their archival headquarters because many of the images they were familiar with and some they were not. And we were able to give to the American people the resource of our 10 years of research. So we're at your disposal.

Senator DAINES. I appreciate that, Mr. Burns. I think it is a lack of awareness oftentimes because I think in the park, just makes you want to kind of get away from it all and some of these hidden gems that we have are a chance to get away from it all too, and it will solve the problem of the congestion in many of the better-known parks.

Mr. BURNS. That's exactly right and the Acting Director suggested, you know, we have, you know, 60 or so national parks, but we have 420 plus units in the National Park Service and they deserve a great deal of attention, not just, obviously, the celebrated major parks.

Senator DAINES. I think about where PBS—hit the back roads of Montana. It is kind of the back roads to these smaller, lesser-known parks.

Senator KING. I think we have another program.

[Laughter.]

Senator DAINES. We do, I will tell you.

Mr. Bengé, the Great American Outdoors Act was passed in the middle of the pandemic. The Chairman talked a little about this as well about implementation. Could you give us just maybe a sports-in-brief quick summary? What's the status of implementation and what projects are first to get funding from the Act?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator and I really appreciate that question. I'm pleased to tell you I think we're doing really well. There were 51 major projects that were funded in FY21 and for each one of those projects we developed a project schedule with particular milestones and when you cross-walk the milestones that we projected in terms of where we are, we're pretty much on target. Our funding list for FY22 will be released with the President's budget and we have—I don't know the obligation rate today off the top of my head—but again, it's on projection. I know that we're working with Yellowstone projects. In Yellowstone we have \$126.5 million in projects. About half of that relates to housing and historic structures and the other half relates to roadwork. And many of our road projects, we complete those in partnership with the Federal Highway Administration.

Senator DAINES. Great, thank you.

My last question, for Mr. Socha. It is my understanding that a key update for the concessionaire rules was held up during the transition to the Biden Administration. Could you give me an update on the status as well as the importance of that rule?

Mr. SOCHA. The status is that the Park Service and the concession community is in agreement, I think, that it needs to move forward. There are some modifications I believe the Park Service would still like to make to what made it into the reading room, which is consistent with our thoughts as well. And we do think it's absolutely important. It's been 20-plus years since the regulations have changed and visitor services and needs have changed and park needs have changed as well.

Senator DAINES. So Mr. Bengé, would you have a status update from the Park Service as to when that rule will be finalized?

Mr. BENGE. Thank you, Senator.

As many folks have mentioned, the current concession regulations were issued 21 years ago and NPS is currently conducting a



final review of the proposed rule and we hope to issue a final rule later this year.

Senator DAINES. Alright, thank you. Mr. Chairman, thanks for the time.

Senator KING. Well again, I would like to thank our witnesses, Ken Burns, David MacDonald, Scott Socha, and Shawn Bengé for a very informative hearing and for your forthcoming answers to our questions. As I mentioned, we will most likely be following up with a hearing later in the summer on the issue of congestion and how to deal with that so that we can maximize enjoyment of the parks while at the same time maximizing access for the American people.

Without any further questions, the Committee hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:20 a.m. the hearing was adjourned.]

## **APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED**

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### Questions from Senator John Hoeven

**Question 1:** *As you may know, North Dakota is working on an exciting new project, the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library. Once complete, this world-class facility will be adjacent to the park that bears his name and will keep the legacy of our 26th president alive for future generations.*

*How impactful on his future presidency was the time that Theodore Roosevelt spent in North Dakota?*

Theodore Roosevelt's time in the West had a major impact on him as a man and politician -- and on his presidency, as well. It first offered him a place to recover from the great twin tragedies in his life, the death of his wife and mother -- within hours of each other in their New York home. Then, getting to know cowboys and ranchers and townspeople widened the circle of people he felt comfortable with; he was a rich man's pampered son from Manhattan, after all, and if he were to succeed in politics he had to learn how to deal with men and women not of his class. He never became one of them, but he learned how to draw them to him. And, finally, he fell in love with the West itself and as president did all that he could to preserve as much of its unrivalled beauty as possible.

**Question 2:** *How important is it for historians, biographers, filmmakers, and the general public to have access to presidential libraries that serve as both a repository of information and an interactive experience?*

Presidential Libraries are essential for anyone seriously interested in the modern presidents and the times through which they -- and we -- have lived. For the first 142 years of the presidency, a president's papers were considered his personal property, and collecting them was a slipshod business: rats ate a good many of George Washington's letters; U.S. Grant misplaced many of his; the day before he died, Chester A. Arthur personally set fire to three garbage cans piled high with documents. When FDR began to build his Library in 1939, critics compared him to a vainglorious pharaoh, intent upon immortalizing himself by building a "Yankee Pyramid." But every president since Roosevelt has seen the immense value of organizing together in one place the papers and pictures, recordings and film footage that make up the record of what they did and didn't do on our behalf. And when, like the Roosevelt Library, they are built on ground that meant something to the president they commemorate, they also offer visitors a vivid sense of the surroundings that made them who they were.



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

JUN 16 2022

The Honorable Angus King, Jr.  
Chairman, Subcommittee on National Parks  
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Enclosed are responses prepared by the National Park Service to questions for the record received by the witness, Mr. Shawn Bengé, following his appearance before your Subcommittee at the May 26, 2021, hearing on *The Current State of the National Park System, including the Impacts of COVID-19 on National Park Service Operations, Staff, Visitation and Facilities*. We apologize for the delay in our response.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to you on these matters.

Sincerely,

Christopher P. Salotti  
Legislative Counsel  
Office of Congressional and  
Legislative Affairs

Enclosure  
cc: The Honorable Steve Daines  
Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
 Subcommittee on National Parks  
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Questions from Committee Ranking Member Barrasso

**Question 1:** Timed entry into our parks is a divisive subject. If a local community disagrees with timed entry into a park, will you respect their views and not take this approach?

**Response:** Changing visitation patterns across the country require the National Park Service (NPS) to continuously evaluate the best methods to protect the resources under its care, while also providing a quality visitor experience. Wherever the NPS seeks to address crowding and congestion issues, the bureau is committed to engaging with all stakeholders—including gateway communities, partners, tribal governments, and state and local governments—to identify solutions, and to conduct compliance and planning processes.

**Question 2:** In your testimony, you described the “Plan Like a Ranger” campaign. Can you describe this program? Can you commit to consulting with this Committee and providing updates on this program?

**Response:** The NPS launched its Plan Like a Park Ranger campaign in advance of Memorial Day weekend 2021 to help Americans have fun and memorable park visits during what was expected to be one of the busiest summers on record in the most famous destination national parks. The 2021 campaign focused on providing the public with “insider tips” from park rangers formatted as “top ten lists” to ensure that visitors planned ahead, were prepared for their visits, and had the ability to adjust plans if needed. The effort was customizable to individual parks and also promoted less-visited parks. Parks also partnered with local organizations, chambers of commerce, state tourism offices, and local press to promote this effort. The NPS anticipates building on the success of the 2021 effort in 2022. We would be happy to keep the Committee updated by providing our press releases and related materials as this effort continues.

**Question 3:** Office of Personnel Management data has shown that both full and seasonal staffing for NPS have declined in recent years. Can you explain why there has been a decline?

**Response:** Between FY 2012 and the end of FY 2021, the operational budget for the National Park System has not kept pace with the loss in purchasing power due to inflation and fixed cost increases. For example, the FY 2022 President’s Budget requested \$48.6 million in its ONPS account for fixed increases associated with increased employee pay and benefits. This has resulted in reduced full time equivalent (FTE) staff funded under the Operation of the National Park System (ONPS) appropriation by 2,645 (-16%).

**Question 4:** With the passage of the Great American Outdoor Act, NPS was given an unprecedented influx of funds to address what used to be one of the agency’s biggest problems – the deferred maintenance backlog. How will NPS use the next four years to ensure that maintenance issues are addressed in a manner that prevents a multi-billion dollar backlog the future?

**Response:** The Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) is providing up to \$6.65 billion to the NPS to address the backlog of maintenance needs. The funding infusion will help us make

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meaningful progress in improving the condition of high priority assets, particularly by allowing us to address some of the largest and most expensive infrastructure projects and to stop further deterioration of assets. All LRF projects require parks to ensure that the park can adequately maintain the asset in acceptable condition throughout its life cycle. The NPS will continue to require traditional appropriated funding sources, including line-item construction, cyclic maintenance, and repair and rehabilitation, to address ongoing and long-term maintenance needs as we strive to maintain all priority assets in acceptable condition.

**Question 5: How will the NPS budgeting strategy change now that there is guaranteed funding for deferred maintenance for the next four years?**

**Response:** The NPS is implementing a revised investment strategy and asset management framework aimed at streamlining current processes and refocusing resources on sound strategic asset management and project scoping and planning. This major investment allows the NPS to pivot from a deferred maintenance focus to conducting maintenance activities on time, preventing asset deterioration, and strategically investing in the future through preventative and cyclic maintenance. We will do this through more advanced project scoping and planning across multiple fund sources; focusing on sustainable innovation and projects necessary to meet code compliance; more aggressively prioritizing assets that leverage tools for sustainable life-cycle asset management; and better prioritizing recurring operational maintenance.

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**Questions from Ranking Member Daines**

**Question 1:** For many, our National Parks were a refuge for people to get outdoors during the pandemic. Many parks worked with their local communities to ensure parks were open for visitors while ensuring the health of employees and visitors were the top priority. As the nation comes out of the pandemic, what changes to NPS operations can we expect to see and when can we expect Park operations to be back to 100%?

**Response:** The National Park Service is dedicated to providing public access to parks while protecting the health and safety of both employees and visitors. The NPS is following CDC guidance regarding COVID-19 mitigation efforts and will continue to open more services as evolving guidance allows. These changes may include increased access to indoor spaces and increased services. Parks are cooperating with local public health departments to address local COVID-19 policies as well.

**Question 2:** Can you commit that parks will remain open and accessible for CY 2021?

**Response:** Parks remained opened to the greatest extent possible during CY 2021 while adhering to CDC guidance regarding COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Parks have been cooperating with local public health departments to address local COVID-19 policies as well.

**Question 3:** Public/Private Partnerships are a critical component to the upkeep and enjoyment of parks. For example, a recent successful partnership resulted in updates to the North Entrance of Yellowstone National Park.

a) What more can the Park Service and Congress do to help promote and streamline these types of projects?

**Response:** The example of the North Entrance of Yellowstone shows the power of philanthropic partnerships to engage the private sector in addressing deferred maintenance, recreation access, resource protection, preservation, and support of high-quality visitor experiences. The NPS is working with communities to identify opportunities for increased collaboration on construction, leases, operations, programs, housing, and other areas where partnerships may help to advance mutual goals.

Congress chartered the National Park Foundation to fulfill the role of being the national philanthropic partner of the NPS. The NPS will continue to work with the Foundation to build the capacity of NPS' local non-profits to successfully engage in public-private partnerships.

b) How do we make it easier for non-profits and partner organizations to work with the Park Service to accomplish mutual goals?

**Response:** The NPS partners with commercial and non-profit partners in a variety of ways to serve the public and protect park resources. The NPS has begun the work of reviewing its partnership authorities and agreements and has found some areas where additional flexibility within current statutory authority

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may be helpful in implementing partner led construction, operations and maintenance of facilities located on federal land.

**Question 4: Would the Park service please provide the following information as it relates to the implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act?**

- a) A list of all FY21 funded projects, with proposed funding, broken down by state and park.**

**Response:** The list of DOI Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) FY 21 projects and FY 22 projects proposed in the President's Budget can be found at <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa/projects>

- b) An updated list of outstanding park deferred maintenance, broken down by state and park.**

**Response:** The most recent data available on deferred maintenance can be accessed on our website: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/identifying-reporting-deferred-maintenance.htm>

- c) A detailed explanation of the methodology the Park Service uses to pick projects to fund.**

**Response:** For the LRF, the NPS is generally considering a deferred maintenance project's size/cost and readiness for obligation, relying on discretionary construction and major maintenance programs to address smaller-scale projects. To further narrow the list, the NPS leadership at the park, region, and headquarters levels will carefully consider the business case for each investment, requiring that restored facilities and infrastructure can be maintained in acceptable condition throughout their respective lifecycles. Priority has been given to projects that stop the further deterioration of assets and that protect the safety of NPS visitors, partners, employees, and park resources.

**Question 5: Can you provide the committee with the following information as it relates to reduced visitation due to the COVID-19 Pandemic?**

- a) The estimated loss in revenue to the Park Service from reduced visitation.**

**Response:** In FY 2020 recreation fee revenue was 19% (\$60 million) lower than in FY 2019, and concession franchise revenue was 50% (\$65 million) lower.

- b) The number of jobs that the Park Service had to eliminate during CY2020.**

**Response:** The NPS has not eliminated any positions due to COVID-19. However, in FY 20, the NPS had 6,211 seasonal employees at the highest point in July, compared to 7,735 at the same point in FY 19, a decrease of 1,524 seasonal employees. The number of permanent employees in FY 20 did not differ significantly from FY 19.



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**c) The number of jobs that are currently unfilled due to staffing shortages.**

**Response:** At the peak of employment in July 2021, NPS had 16,146 permanent employees and 6,408 temporary/seasonal employees. For comparison, at the peak of employment in July 2020, there were 16,090 permanent and 6,211 temporary/seasonal employees.

**d) The number of deferred maintenance projects that were canceled or rescheduled due to park access limitation and the estimated project costs.**

**Response:** No major construction contracts managed by the Denver Service Center within the NPS were cancelled or rescheduled. A few contracts were extended due to the pandemic by mutually agreed time extensions with limited interruptions.

**Question 6:** As you stated in relation to my question related to employee housing, “NPS employees are expected to live in private market housing unless...affordable housing is not available nearby.” Can you please answer the following question in relation to affordable housing?

**a) What metric does NPS use to calculate the cap for affordable housing?**

**Response:** The NPS implements its housing program in accordance with the requirements of Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-45 “Rental and Construction of Government Housing.” OMB Circular A-45 encourages agencies to consider housing affordable when rent, utilities, and insurance are between 30% and 35% of an employee’s gross income. Current policy defines affordable as 30%.

**b) What is the average housing or rental cost for park employees living in West Yellowstone, Gardiner and Cooke City?**

**Response:** There are extremely limited options for private housing in the gateway communities of West Yellowstone, Gardiner, and Cooke City, Montana.

In West Yellowstone in May of 2021, the median home price was \$509,247 and had increased 11.3% from 2020 to 2021. Average rents in the area were listed as ranging from \$672 for a one-bedroom to \$1,234 for a three-bedroom apartment. However, long-term rentals are difficult to find; in the first week of June 2021, we found just two options for rental housing with prices of \$2,800 and \$6,000 per month, while there were over 300 vacation rental properties listed.

In Gardiner in May of 2021, the median home price is \$484,129 and had increased 19.4% from 2020 to 2021. An online search of housing rentals found zero results, and only two rental options listed through the community Facebook page over the previous six months. Long-term rentals in Gardiner are very rare and the units that are available vary widely in condition and age. As of May 2021, there were 157 vacation rental properties in Gardiner.

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In Cooke City in May 2021, the median home price was \$479,941 and had increased 4.5% from 2020 to 2021. Cooke City is such a small town that it has not historically been used for local employee housing. Housing inventory is extremely limited; only two homes have sold over the past year. There were no rentals available in Cooke City through an online search. However, there are 26 vacation rentals advertised online.

**c) How many employees currently live in Yellowstone Park and how many live in gateway communities?**

**Response:** Housing occupancy numbers from the 2019 summer season are the most representative of full staffing and housing capacity that we currently have. In 2019, Yellowstone had 497 employees living in park housing and 241 living in gateway communities.

<b>2019 NPS Staffing at Yellowstone NP</b>	<b>Living in Park Housing</b>	<b>Living in Gateway Communities</b>
Permanent	181	209
Seasonal	316	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>497 (67%)</b>	<b>241 (33%)</b>

**d) Do you believe that there is a shortage of affordable housing options for employees of Yellowstone National Park?**

**Response:** There is an extremely limited inventory of available housing in Yellowstone gateway communities, and, when housing is available, prices for purchase and rental can be higher than the national average. Over the past decade, housing prices (purchase and rental) have risen dramatically in communities surrounding Yellowstone. Many of these communities have transitioned to short-term rental markets, making year-round rentals rare and expensive; this is a common trend in gateway communities throughout the National Park System. The lack of available and affordable housing in surrounding communities substantially impacts workforce recruitment and retention. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on ways to address infrastructure needs to provide affordable housing for our employees; whether it is addressing current infrastructure within park units or by working with gateway communities and partners to provide affordable workforce housing for employees.

**e) Besides Yellowstone National Park, what parks have in-park housing?**

**Response:** See Attachment A – NPS units that have Government-furnished housing for some employees.

**f) What other NPS units have a shortage of affordable employee housing?**

**Response:** The Department conducts extensive surveys of communities near parks to set rents based on local market rates. The NPS uses this data on a park-by-park basis to make decisions about whether housing in the community is affordable and for whom, as well as how to assign units within a park. Even

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when housing is affordable in an area, there may still be limited availability, especially in rural areas. Parks as diverse as Acadia, Golden Gate, Manzanar, and Glacier all face housing challenges.

**g) If there is no in-park housing or affordable housing available, how can NPS expect to recruit and retain the best employees?**

**Response:** The NPS cannot achieve its mission without a well-supported workforce. Staffing, housing, and other issues are impacting morale and deserve our active attention. The NPS recognizes that affordable housing is a major issue in recruiting and retaining good employees and is continually looking at ways to address employees' housing needs. NPS has authority to subsidize leased housing in the local community and does so in a limited capacity when appropriate, but at an increased cost to the government. We appreciate the committee's interest in this matter and look forward to working with you on ways we can more fully address this need.

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**Question from Senator Hirono**

**Question:** As we discussed during the hearing, in response to the NPS guidance document published last month I would like to know what resources the National Park Service will need to carry out climate change planning and subsequent climate change-related projects at NPS units all across the country.

**Response:** Climate change potentially affects every unit of the National Park System and is a serious threat to park ecosystems, natural and cultural resources, and visitor infrastructure. In response, the NPS is designing and building with sustainable practices and materials; incorporating climate change adaptation and resiliency strategies into park planning, resource protection, and investment decisions; conducting climate change vulnerability assessments and research; and implementing relevant communication strategies to help assist parks in responding and adapting to climate change. The NPS is also working to ensure that all parts of the organization, including design and construction experts, natural and cultural resources stewardship experts, visitor use planners, and transportation planners have appropriate and relevant information available to foster the best possible decisions concerning the future of park infrastructure, resources, and visitor experiences.

The NPS has completed a service-wide assessment of sea level rise exposure in parks and produced over 250 park-specific reports detailing climate trend analyses and projections. In addition, over 100 climate change vulnerability assessments are available for selected resources in parks, and sea level rise projections are available for 118 coastal park units. The FY 2022 operations budget request for the NPS included a \$208.5 million increase to address climate change impacts, increase NPS conservation efforts, and support climate science. The FY 2022 budget also requested a \$61.0 million increase in its construction account for conservation and climate-related efforts to replace the NPS vehicle fleet with zero emissions vehicles, climate adaptation projects for facilities, closing and securing abandoned mineral lands, and conducting climate vulnerability assessments and environmental impact planning.

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**Question from Senator Hoeven**

**Question:** We've been working closely with the Superintendent of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the National Park Service's Regional office to ensure that the Scenic Loop Road reconstruction effort is completed as soon as possible. The project was included on the FY21 priority list, and construction will begin next spring. I appreciate NPS' prioritization of this project thus far, and want to continue working with you to see the project through in a timely manner.

**Will you continue to work with me and my staff to ensure that this project is completed on schedule?**

**Response:** Yes, we plan to continue communicating with your staff. The 30% design was out on time for our review at the end of May 2021. We are on schedule for a contract award date of fall 2022.

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**Question from Chairman King**

**Question:** As we discussed in the hearing, the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) last year was monumental for land conservation. Implementation of this law will be critical, and I want to ensure that the agencies and Congress are funding projects in a transparent manner. I understand that the National Park Service, as well as other agencies receiving funding, have developed their own criteria for prioritizing projects for funding—and while these criteria might be different from each other, they are reflections of the missions of the respective agencies.

To ensure that there is appropriate transparency and accountability, I request the agencies prepare a short report that outlines the criteria they used to create that project list. This will help this Committee and the Appropriations Committee better understand how these determinations were made and provide guidance for stakeholders.

**Response:** Briefings on this issue were provided to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources staff in the form of detailed program briefing on October 15, 2021, and to the House Committee on Natural Resources staff on June 7, 2021, and October 28, 2021. As provided in those briefings, the NPS selects projects for the Legacy Restoration Fund, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund as generally outlined below.

Legacy Restoration Fund

For the LRF, the NPS is generally considering a deferred maintenance project's size/cost and readiness for obligation, relying on discretionary construction and major maintenance programs to address smaller-scale projects. To further narrow the list, the NPS leadership at the park, region, and headquarters levels will carefully consider the business case for each investment, requiring that restored facilities and infrastructure can be maintained in acceptable condition throughout their respective lifecycles. Priority has been given to projects that stop the further deterioration of assets and that protect the safety of NPS visitors, partners, employees, and park resources.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (Federal)

Park units provide the initial information for each request. Proposals are then reviewed and ranked by the Land Acquisition Program using established, service-wide criteria to determine the initial national priority list. The major criteria used in the ranking process are: threat to the resource, preservation of the resource, visitor use, if a commitment has been made to acquire, involvement of partners, availability of matching funds, continuation of an ongoing effort, recreational opportunities, hardship of the owner, existence of legislative authority to acquire, ability to obligate appropriated dollars, regional priority of the project, congressional and local support, impact to operation and maintenance of the unit (either savings or cost), economic escalation or inflation factors, and the type of the unit.

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 Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Shawn Benge

**Questions from Senator Marshall**

**Question 1:** The National Park Service is currently working with the Society of the First Infantry Division to add the names of over 600 fallen soldiers to the First Infantry Division Monument located in President's Park. How are you progressing on approval of the construction designs for the First Infantry Division Monument modifications authorized by sec. 1083 of the FY21 National Defense Authorization Act?

**Response:** The NPS is working with the Society of the First Infantry Division (Society) and its design team to develop final design documents for approval from the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission for the modification to the First Infantry Division Monument. The Society received concept approval in late 2021. The NPS and the Society initiated National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 consultation with the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office in July 2021 and are nearing the end of this process.

**Question 2:** What obstacles are preventing the National Parks Service from approving construction plans for modifications to the First Infantry Division Monument?

**Response:** Congress authorized the First Infantry Division Monument modification on January 1, 2021. Since that time, the NPS and the Society are proceeding through the standard process for the establishment and modification of commemorative works in Washington, D.C. outlined by the Commemorative Works Act. The design development process is proceeding steadily, and no significant obstacles have been encountered.

**Question 3:** When do you expect construction to begin on the modifications to the First Infantry Division Monument located in President's Park?

**Response:** Construction on the First Division Monument modification can begin once the Society has completed the requirements for a NPS construction permit including design approvals by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission, and compliance with federal environmental and historic preservation laws. The Society must also provide documentation that it possesses 100% of the funds to design and construct the modification, plus a 10% donation to support the perpetual maintenance and preservation of the monument.

The timeframe to complete the requirements for issuance of a NPS construction permit varies depending on the pace of the memorial sponsor's design development and fundraising.

The following parks offer government-furnished housing to employees:

<b>Alaska Region</b>
BERING LAND BRIDGE NP
DENALI NP
GATES OF THE ARCTIC NP
GLACIER BAY NP&P
KATMAI NP & PRESERVE
KENAI FJORDS NP
KLONDIKE GOLDRUSH NH
LAKE CLARK NP & PRESERVE
SITKA NHP
WESTERN ARCTIC NATL PARKLANDS
WRANGELL-ST ELIAS NP&P
YUKON-CHARLEY RIVERS NATL PRES
<b>Intermountain Region</b>
ARCHES NP
AZTEC RUINS NM
BANDELIER NM
BIG BEND NP
BIG THICKET NP RESERVE
BIGHORN CANYON NRA
BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON
BRYCE CANYON NP
CANYON DE CHELLY NM
CANYONLANDS NP
CAPITOL REEF NP
CAPULIN VOLCANO NM
CARLSBAD CAVERNS NP
CASA GRANDE RUINS NM
CEDAR BREAKS NM
CHACO CULTURE NHP
CHICKASAW NRA
CHIRICAHUA NM
COLORADO NM
CORONADO NM
CURECANTI NRA
DEVILS TOWER NM
DINOSAUR NM
EL MALPAIS NM
EL MORRO NM
FORT BOWIE NHS
FORT DAVIS NHS
FORT UNION NM
FOSSIL BUTTE NM



GILA CLIFF DWELLINGS NM
GLACIER NP
GLEN CANYON NRA
GOLDEN SPIKE NHS
GRAND CANYON NP/ HORACE M ALBRIGHT TRAINING CTR
GRAND TETON NP
GREAT SAND DUNES NM
GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NP
HOVENWEEP NM
HUBBELL TRADING POST NHS
JOHN D ROCKEFELLER JR MEM PKWY
LITTLE BIGHORN NM
LYNDON B JOHNSON NHP
MESA VERDE NP
MONTEZUMA CASTLE NM
NATURAL BRIDGES NM
NAVAJO NM
ORGAN PIPE CACTUS NM
PADRE ISLAND NATL SEASHORE
PECOS NHP
PETRIFIED FOREST NP
PIPE SPRING NM
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NP
SAGUARO NP
SALINAS PUEBLO MISSION NM
SUNSET CRATER VOLCANO NM
TIMPANOGOS CAVE NM
TONTO NM
TUMACACORI NHP
TUZIGOOT NM
VALLES CALDERA NP
WALNUT CANYON NM
WHITE SANDS NM
WUPATKI NM
YELLOWSTONE NP
ZION NP
AGATE FOSSIL BEDS NM
<b>Midwest Region</b>
APOSTLE ISLANDS NL
ARKANSAS POST NM
BADLANDS NP
BUFFALO NR
CUYAHOGA VALLEY NP
FORT UNION TRADING POST N
GRAND PORTAGE NM

HARRY S TRUMAN NHS
HERBERT HOOVER NHS
HOMESTEAD NHP
HOT SPRINGS NATL PARK
INDIANA DUNES NP
ISLE ROYALE NP
JEWEL CAVE NM
LINCOLN BOYHOOD NM
MOUNT RUSHMORE NM
OZARK NSR
PERRY'S VICT & INT PEACE MEM
PICTURED ROCKS NL
SAINT CROIX NATL SCENIC RIVER
SLEEPING BEAR DUNES NL
THEODORE ROOSEVELT NP
VOYAGEURS NP
WIND CAVE NP
<b>National Capital Region</b>
ANTIETAM NB
C & O CANAL NHP
CATOCTIN MOUNTAIN PARK
HARPERS FERRY NHP
MANASSAS NBP
MONOCACY NB
PRINCE WILLIAM FOREST PARK
ROCK CREEK PARK
<b>Northeast Region</b>
ACADIA NP
ALLEGHENY PORTAGE RAILROAD
APPOMATTOX COURT HOUSE NH
ASSATEAGUE ISLAND NS
BOSTON NHP
CAPE COD NS
COLONIAL NHP
DELAWARE WATER GAP NRA
EISENHOWER NHS
FIRE ISLAND NS
FLIGHT 93 NM
FORT MCHENRY NM
FORT NECESSITY NB
FREDERICKSBURG & SPOTSYLVANIA
FRIENDSHIP HILL NHS
GATEWAY NRA
GEORGE WASHINGTON BIRTHPLACE
GETTYSBURG NMP

HAMPTON NHS
HOME OF FRANKLIN D ROOSEVELT
HOPEWELL FURNACE NHS
INDEPENDENCE NHP
JOHNSTOWN FLOOD NATL MEMORIAL
MARSH-BILLINGS-ROCKEFELLER NHP
MINUTE MAN NHP
MORRISTOWN NHP
NEW RIVER GORGE NR
PETERSBURG NB
RICHMOND NBP
SAGAMORE HILL NHS
SAINT CROIX ISL INTL HIST SITE
SAINT-GAUDENS NHS
SARATOGA NHP
SHENANDOAH NP
VALLEY FORGE NHP
VANDERBILT MANSION NHS
<b>Pacific West Region</b>
BIG HOLE NB
CHANNEL ISLANDS NP
CRATER LAKE NP
CRATERS OF THE MOON NM
DEATH VALLEY NP
DEVILS POSTPILE NM
FORT VANCOUVER NHS
GOLDEN GATE NRA
GREAT BASIN NP
HALEAKALA NP
HAWAII VOLCANOES NP
JOHN DAY FOSSIL BEDS NM
JOSHUA TREE NP
KALAUPAPA NHP
LAKE MEAD NRA
LAKE ROOSEVELT NRA
LASSEN VOLCANIC NP
LAVA BEDS NM
MOJAVE NAT PRESERVE
MOUNT RAINIER NP
MUIR WOODS NM
NORTH CASCADES NP
OLYMPIC NP
OREGON CAVES NM
PINNACLES NP
POINT REYES NS

PRESIDIO OF SAN FRANCISCO
REDWOOD NATL & STATE PARKS
SAN JUAN NATL HISTORIC PARK
SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS NRA
SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NP
WHISKEYTOWN NRA
YOSEMITE NP
<b>Southeast Region</b>
ABRAHAM LINCOLN BIRTHPLACE
BIG CYPRESS NP
BIG SOUTH FORK NRRRA
BISCAYNE NP
BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY
CAPE HATTERAS NS
CAPE LOOKOUT NS
CARL SANDBURG HOME NHS
CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER
CHICKAMAUGA & CHATTANOOGA
CHRISTIANSTED NHS
CONGAREE NP
COWPENS NB
CUMBERLAND GAP NHP
CUMBERLAND ISLAND NS
DRY TORTUGAS NP
EVERGLADES NP
FORT DONELSON NATL BATTLEFIELD
FORT FREDERICA NM
FORT MATANZAS NM
FORT SUMTER NM
GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NP
GULF ISLANDS NS
HORSESHOE BEND NMP
KENNESAW MOUNTAIN NB
KINGS MOUNTAIN NMP
MAMMOTH CAVE NP
OCMULGEE NM
RUSSELL CAVE NM
SAN JUAN NHS (PUERTO RICO)
SHILOH NMP
STONES RIVER NB
TIMUCUAN ECOL & HIST PRESERVE
VICKSBURG NMP
VIRGIN ISLANDS NP

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks**

**May 26, 2021 Hearing: *The Current State of the National Park System, including the Impacts of COVID-19 on National Park Service Operations, Staff, Visitation and Facilities*  
Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. David MacDonald**

**Questions from Senator Steve Daines**

**Questions:** Public/Private Partnerships are a critical component to the upkeep and enjoyment of parks. For example a recent successful partnership resulted in updates to the North Entrance of Yellowstone National Park.

- a) What more can the Park Service and Congress do to help promote and streamline these types of projects?
- b) How do we make it easier for non-profits and partner organizations to work with the Park Service to accomplish mutual goals?

**David MacDonald responses:**

(I will take a combined approach to the two questions, as they are very much related))

As your example from Yellowstone illustrates, the success of public-private partnership in national parks is noteworthy – and yet there is an opportunity to build on this track record to do more. The park partner community is growing, both in terms of the number and variety of organizations, as well as the revenue they generate. The National Park Service helped support this growth by improving its policy framework around private philanthropy (Directors Order#21) back in 2016. We have continued to learn and grow over the past five years, however; thus additional updates and refinements to DO#21 are worth considering. In addition, the NPS would benefit from building on the good work underway to provide increased training resources to park staff around fundamental philanthropic competencies and skills. This will help grow the culture of philanthropy and partnerships within the National Park Service.

Improving and expanding hiring authorities to include partners where possible would add flexibility and efficiency to what can often be a cumbersome government process, while also enhancing teams such as service corps that help build the workforce of the future. Our shared efforts would also benefit from expanded staff capacity within the NPS Partnerships Office to help keep pace with the tremendous growth in the partner community. To complement added capacity, a process to review and streamline the many levels of oversight and reporting is also warranted, with a goal of eliminating those that add to NPS workload but can be duplicative of roles that the IRS or State governments may already be serving. Much of it boils down to working collaboratively and relying on each other's areas of expertise. This is already happening with many strong relationships throughout the NPS; however, we must look for ways to eliminate barriers to expanding upon this approach in order to meet the challenges and opportunities before us.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks**

**May 26, 2021 Hearing: *The Current State of the National Park System, including the Impacts of COVID-19 on National Park Service Operations, Staff, Visitation and Facilities*  
Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Scott Socha**

**Questions from Ranking Member John Barrasso, M.D.**

**Question 1:** Deferred maintenance is a problem that continues to plague the National Park Service (NPS). Can you describe how this impacts concessions operations?

The \$11.9 billion of repairs or maintenance on roads, buildings, utility systems, and other structures and facilities across the National Park System is of great concern to concessionaires. Deferred maintenance, simply put, impedes our ability to best serve our guests. Without investment in critical infrastructure, access to our parks can become limited. Without investment in buildings and facilities, concessionaires entrusted with operations in our National Parks are unable to innovate and attract new clientele. Additionally, the lack of improvements in employee housing can make recruitment difficult, leaving our parks without adequate staffing levels. In short, deferred maintenance efforts pose threats to access, to the environment, and to the safety of visitors to the great outdoors. We are hopeful that funds appropriated in the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act will begin to significantly address deferred maintenance, improving accesses and attracting new guests to National Parks in 2021.

**Question 2:** The COVID-19 Pandemic has challenged our country and the world. Our National Parks have provided a venue for Americans to enjoy the outdoors during this moment. Our parks have also been important to local economies and small businesses. Can you speak about the importance of our parks to small businesses, particularly over the last year?

National Parks concessioners include leaders in the global hospitality industry as well as small businesses that are often multi-generational and very specialized to specific park units, typically in challenging locations, difficult conditions, and often distant from traditional labor markets. The ability of these small businesses to operate in our National Parks is mutually beneficial. Small concessionaires specialize in their specific market, park, and conditions to best serve NPS visitors. Additionally, the gateway communities just outside the National Parks are often host to small and local restaurants and retail locations, catering specifically to park guests. These small businesses are the lifeblood of their communities, providing jobs and economic security to families in those locations.

**Questions from Senator Steve Daines**

**Questions:** The closure of certain parks lead to significant loss of revenue for concessionaries.

- a) Do you know if any concessionaries went out of business due to park closures and curtailments during 2020?

COVID-19's impact on concessioner operations varied significantly by park unit and type of service. The impact was greatest on businesses relying on international/long-haul travelers and guided/ transportation related operations, and the effects were felt by large and small concessionaires alike. While some NPS members were able to access economic recovery provisions covered in the COVID-19 relief legislation

## U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

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passed by Congress, meaningful direct assistance was limited for most of our members. Because of this, more than 90 operators filed requests with NPS for reductions in franchise fee rates, as permitted in our contracts in the event of “extraordinary, unanticipated changes” to business. NPHA worked closely with the NPS to try and find solutions that would limit the impact to NPS’s budget while providing struggling family run businesses with vital relief. We are grateful that NPS creatively offered a two-year contract lengthening to many NPHA members, which provided a critical lifeline for many concessioners. While this relief helped many of the NPHA members, a few were shut out and we encourage the NPS to find ways to help those who continue to have outstanding relief requests.

- b) Concessionaires have to abide by strict contracts and meet certain standards. Is there concern that due to COVID-19 and park closures that concessionaires will be unable to meet or fulfill the standards in their contracts?

Again, COVID-19’s impact on concessioner operations varied significantly by park unit and type of service. Looking to the upcoming summer, we are encouraged that Americans are excited to visit and explore our national parks. There is tremendous pent-up demand for travel to outdoor destinations. Concessioners are working closely with park superintendents and NPS leadership to adjust safety protocols and hospitality offerings as needed and on short notice. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further demonstrated the value of partnership between NPS and concessioners. We expect that as the pandemic continues to recede, we can continue to relax protocols in a responsible manner, and make good on the commitments we have made in our contracts.

- c) Generally, has the Park Service worked with concessionaires to ensure that their needs have been met?

Yes, absolutely. NPS and the park superintendents across the country worked closely with us in a very difficult situation, and we appreciate their flexibility in trying to provide the best and safest guest experience. NPS worked with us every step of the way on fee relief, as well as a creative contract lengthening solution that will allow us to fulfill the standards and commitments concessionaires have set out to achieve. Additionally, we recognize that the NPS is also experiencing financial impact from COVID-19, including diminished receipts from concessions contracts which are typically related to a percentage of concessioner sales. The Department’s creative solutions and work with NPHA, however, will ensure that concessionaires remain solvent, and able to contribute those percentages in the future. The partnership between NPS and NPHA has gotten us through the worst of this pandemic, and our partnership will continue now for years to come.