A REVIEW OF THE IMPACTS OF OVERCROWDING IN OUR NATIONAL PARKS ON PARK RESOURCES AND VISITOR EXPERIENCES, AND CONSIDERATION OF STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES UNITED STATES SENATE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION JULY 28, 2021

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ON PARK RESOURCES AND VISITOR 
EXPERIENCES, AND CONSIDERATION 
OF STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO 
VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT 

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28, 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. The Subcommittee will come to order. Today's hearing is for the Subcommittee to review the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences, and to consider strategic approaches to visitor use management. 

I would like to say at the outset that I think neither my co-chair nor myself have a ready-made set of solutions or proposed legislation. This is truly a hearing to listen and learn and discuss options in an open and free way, to talk about not only the situation today, but where we will be in five or ten years. So we are talking strategically, not necessarily tactically. 

As vaccine rates continue to rise across the country, Americans who have been stuck inside for a year look for outdoor recreation. We are having a record-breaking year at many of our national parks. Even as international visitation is down due to ongoing COVID–19 concerns, visitation numbers at our most iconic parks—like Glacier, Acadia, and Yosemite—are already at all-time highs. 

It is great to see so many Americans are taking advantage of these parks. That is, after all, why we protect these lands in the first place. However, at the same time, we must recognize that overcrowding in the parks itself can degrade the natural resources and wildlife that these units are designed to protect. We can, accidentally, love our parks to death. 

Overcrowding can also significantly harm the visitor experience and strain the resources of gateway communities, souring what
should be a once in a lifetime vacation. Watching the sunrise from the top of the Cadillac Mountain is a wonderful experience. Staring at the tail lights of the car in front of you as you are trying to get up the mountain and find a parking place—not so much.

We know there are multiple ways to address these issues and we must consider the full range. For example, we can encourage visitation to lesser-known parks. Not all park units have seen the same astronomical growth that is impacting our better-known parks. Chairman Daines examined this in a field hearing several years ago. We should explore opportunities to highlight these lesser-known jewels, including reviewing the National Park Service’s restrictions on advertising.

Timed tickets and reservation systems are also options that are increasingly being considered and put into place, if not for entire parks, at least at some of the most crowded sites within parks. Many national park units have had de facto reservation systems for years—the Statue of Liberty, for example.

These systems can help protect public lands and support high-quality visitor experiences, but they also present challenges that we must consider. It is important to ensure that reservation systems do not lock out visitors. America’s national parks are for everyone and should remain as accessible as possible to all.

Staffing is also an issue that should be examined, as staffing at the national parks has not kept pace with the growth in visitors. More visitors have stretched our rangers and staff thin and made park operations more challenging on a day-to-day basis. This chart is a graphic representation of exactly what I just noted.

[The chart mentioned by Senator King follows:]
Senator King. The green mountain is the visitation at Yellowstone. The red dotted line is staff levels. As you can see, the staff levels are relatively fixed and the visitation has almost doubled, or more than doubled. So this is an indication of the problem of the static staff versus the astronomical growth in visitation.

Through the Great American Outdoors Act, this Committee has done significant work to ensure that the capital facility maintenance backlog is being addressed. We may now need to turn our attention to the operations side of the ledger.

Vehicle limitations are also something that must be considered. Often we talk about too many people, but actually we are talking about too many cars. There are alternatives for us to look at. For example, many years ago, one of my sons and I had the opportunity to visit the Matterhorn in Zermatt, Switzerland, where the gateway community is entirely free of private automobiles. They only have golf carts and horse-drawn carts. Everyone that goes to the town gets there via a train from a station about 20 miles away, where there is a very large parking lot. So there are no automobiles in the town whatsoever, and it works.

Additional investments in transit options, both through free visitor shuttles and private partners, could allow us to continue growing the number of people in parks while limiting vehicle traffic.

Today’s conversation will explore these opportunities and more. There are no obvious answers to some of these challenges. There is no one single solution that will fit all the situations in our parks. I know there is a path forward that we can build by collaboration and input from the local level, and it is my hope that our conversation today is a step in that direction.

I would now like to recognize Senator Daines for his opening comments.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR STEVE DAINES, U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA

Senator Daines. Chairman King, thank you. I first want to welcome a Montanan, who is part of this hearing today, Mr. Gartland, who is joining us from Whitefish, Montana. I have a lot of memories as a kid spending time in Whitefish. My cousins built the Viking Lodge there that got replaced by the Whitefish Lodge, and my Chief of Staff is a proud graduate of Whitefish High School. So we are glad to have Mr. Gartland here. He is the Executive Director of the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce. He is a strong voice for his community and Glacier National Park, as Whitefish is one of the key gateway communities for Glacier National Park.

The beauty and the history of our national parks truly set us apart from the rest of the world. Glacier National Park is one of the crown jewels of the park system and a major attraction for tourists who come from around the world and who support thousands of jobs and boost the economy for these local communities.

Whitefish and other gateway communities see firsthand the benefits of our national parks, and I am excited to hear from Mr. Gartland on how the Park Service and our local communities are working together to address the challenges and benefits of increased visitation to our parks.
I echo Chairman King’s remarks that we are here to learn, to hear from you all around the course that we ought to set going forward as we address this challenge of increased visitation levels to our national parks. Today’s hearing will examine the effects of increased visitation to many of our national parks and how this is affecting the visitor experience, the employees—and Chairman King, I was struck by that chart you showed of Yellowstone National Park. I thought that was a side view of the Grand Tetons, that green chart, but that was the visitation levels there.

[Laughter.]
And we saw the very flat line there on employee levels.
I grew up in the shadow of Yellowstone National Park, as a Bozeman native. I have personally witnessed the increase in visitation and how that affects our local communities and the park itself.
This chart behind me shows the growth in visitation.
[The chart mentioned by Senator Daines follows:]
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Glacier National Park</th>
<th>Little Bighorn Battlefield Monument</th>
<th>Big Hole Battlefield Monument</th>
<th>Grant-Kohrs Ranch Historic Site</th>
<th>Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area</th>
<th>Fort Union Trading Post Historic Site</th>
<th>Yellowstone National Park</th>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>1,474,578</td>
<td>183,311</td>
<td>37,317</td>
<td>19,449</td>
<td>8,520</td>
<td>2,000,269</td>
<td>2,823,572</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,986,737</td>
<td>230,891</td>
<td>43,820</td>
<td>26,753</td>
<td>32,222</td>
<td>2,838,233</td>
<td>3,840,185</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,728,693</td>
<td>40,470</td>
<td>330,329</td>
<td>20,864</td>
<td>19,381</td>
<td>2,838,233</td>
<td>14,458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,200,048</td>
<td>44,771</td>
<td>320,959</td>
<td>22,075</td>
<td>14,458</td>
<td>3,640,185</td>
<td>25,043</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>3,049,839</td>
<td>45,661</td>
<td>241,304</td>
<td>25,043</td>
<td>12,967</td>
<td>4,020,288</td>
<td>12,967</td>
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Senator Daines. The yellow bar up there is 1980. As you can see the baseline, Yellowstone National Park had just over two million visitors in 1980. Glacier National Park had about 1.5 million. Look at what has happened now in 2019. We took that snapshot because 2020, with COVID, probably is—we will put that as an asterisk and we are looking at 2021 now, and we will likely break these record numbers. But we saw doubling over the course of 1980 to 2019.

The other thing I should note is in 1980, that is when I graduated from Bozeman High School, visitation numbers there have doubled since then with now over four million visitors to Yellowstone National Park. Similarly, Glacier National Park numbers were 1.5 million in 1980 and now they are three million.

However, this is not the case for all of our national parks in Montana. We have these smaller gems—and gems is still even an understatement—describing the amazing beauty and interest of these national parks like Grant-Kohrs Ranch, where I held a field hearing a few years ago. The Big Hole Battlefield, the Bighorn Canyon Recreation Area—these have seen consistent growth, but not nearly to the levels that we have seen at the more well-known parks.

I think one of the ways we might be able to better address the increased visitation is looking for ways to encourage folks to spend a day at some of these lesser-visited parks. This will not only relieve congestion and wear-and-tear at our larger parks, but it will also, importantly, boost the local economies by these smaller parks.

I also believe that we should be looking at innovative ways to connect with visitors to help spread out visitation within the parks. As many of you know, I have a tech background and was part of growing a cloud computing business in my hometown of Bozeman. I believe there are innovative solutions out there that the private sector is using that the Park Service might look at adapting and using to relieve pressure points on our parks.

I also want to explore the Park Service’s hiring process. Looking at the Chairman’s chart again, with Yellowstone, clearly we need to find ways to get additional employees to help with the increased demand in visitation to these parks. And we want to look at how quickly they are responding to hire qualified individuals to address the issues we are talking about today, because employer retention and morale is key to addressing increased visitation.

Finally, I want to explore more about Glacier National Park’s implementation of a ticket entry system. I have heard a lot about this from Montanans. I look forward to hearing more from Mr. Gartland and the Park Service and how that program’s going.

Before I close out though, I want to ensure that we not only are looking at the challenges of increased visitation but also the positive impacts of this increased visitation, and that is the economic numbers. Because with increased visitation come increased jobs and economic impact for local communities. In fact, according to the National Park Service, in 2019 park visitors supported nearly 10,000 jobs in Montana, spent an estimated $640 million in gateway communities, and contributed nearly $900 million in economic output to Montana. If you look at that chart behind me, you can see that is a 70 percent increase in economic impact since 2012.
Economic Contributions to the Montana Economy

- $640 Million to Gateway Communities
- $892 Million in Economic Impact
- 9,620 Jobs in Montana
Senator DAINES. Based on what I have heard from my Montana superintendents, we will see major increases in the economic impact of our national parks when we tally up what is going on in 2021. And you know, this is a good thing. While there are challenges we need to look at because of increased visitation, we also need to ensure we are not closing off our parks to the world and that we continue to grow the visitation, the jobs, and the economic benefits they provide.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I turn it back to you. I look forward to a robust discussion and to testimony from our excellent witnesses.

Senator KING. Thank you, Senator Daines. Let’s put up the pictures of Yosemite and Acadia to emphasize what we are talking about. This is Yosemite.

[The picture of parking at Yosemite follows:]
Senator King. Yosemite is one of the most spectacular places in the world, but I can guarantee the people in that traffic jam were not enjoying it at that particular moment. The other is Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park in Maine—the same issue.

[The picture of parking at Cadillac Mountain follows:]
Senator King. You see the automobiles. People are losing their tempers because they cannot find a parking place. Buses cannot turn around. It is a very difficult situation. And again, the tension and the paradox that we have is, we want visitation to our national parks, but we do not want the visitation itself to impair the experience of the national parks, or the park itself.

Our witnesses today are Mr. Michael Reynolds—he is currently the National Parks Regional Director for Regions 6, 7, and 8, where he oversees 89 parks in nine states. Previously, he was Superintendent at Yosemite. Were you in that traffic jam?—yes, sir. And served as Acting Director for the entire National Park Service.

Kevin Schneider is also with us via Zoom. He is the Superintendent at Acadia National Park, and will be available to us for questions.

Ms. Kristen Brengel is the Senior Vice President of the National Parks Conservation Association, where she leads the Association's advocacy on public lands conservation, natural and cultural resource issues, and park funding.

Mr. Kevin Gartland, as Senator Daines mentioned, is the Executive Director of the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce, where he represents a gateway community which, of course, gateway communities are a major part of the park experience and important beneficiaries of the economic development aspects of the national park program nationwide.

Mr. Reynolds, you are recognized to provide us an opening statement. Thank you.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, INTERIOR REGIONS 6, 7, and 8, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Mr. Reynolds, Thank you, Chairman King, thank you very much. Ranking Member Daines and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and the visitor experience, and consider strategic approaches to visitor use management.

I'm joined remotely by Kevin Schneider, the Superintendent of Acadia National Park, who will be available to answer questions about operations at Acadia.

This past year has reminded us how important national parks and public lands are to our well-being, providing us close-to-home and destination-based outdoor opportunities. National parks are also places for people to connect with the inspirational wonders of nature and the stories that bond us to the meaningful places of this nation.

The National Park Service wants every visitor to have a great park experience. We seek ways to support more diverse, accessible, and inclusive experiences that are compatible with the protection of the resources. Ensuring visitors have enjoyable experiences, however, is becoming increasingly challenging in our most popular parks.

There are 423 parks in the National Park System encompassing over 85 million acres across our nation, but visitation trends among
them vary greatly. About half of all our recreation visits are occurring at only the top 23 most visited parks, with significant congestion conditions concentrated in the most popular 12 to 15 destination parks. Crowding conditions tend to happen at hotspots and where entries and exits are limited. Crowding can also be felt at the most popular scenic viewpoints that are within one-quarter mile of a parking lot.

Congestion occurs when demand to access a site, parking area, entrance station, or roadway exceeds capacity. As a result, the National Park Service is employing a range of strategies to provide a welcoming environment while ensuring protection of resources. In addition to using pilot projects and flexible planning tools to test ideas, we are conducting robust public and stakeholder engagement before committing to long-term implementation.

Parks are also working with local and regional tourism entities to develop strategies for promoting sustainable tourism. To address vehicular congestion, the National Park Service has also invested in shuttles and multi-use paths where biking and walking are also encouraged.

Timed-entry systems are now in place at several parks. Muir Woods National Monument has used a successful concession-run timed-entry reservation system since the beginning of 2018. Acadia National Park implemented a vehicle reservation system, as approved in a May 2019 Transportation Plan at Cadillac Summit Road during the peak season. This system is enhanced by other visitor services, including by expanding the Island Explorer transit service and commercial tours. Glacier, Rocky, and Yosemite National Parks have all implemented timed-entry systems as pilot projects with each addressing a specific park-level issue.

With the ticketed entry system, Glacier National Park estimates that the park has been able to adequately serve and support the same daily visitation on Going-to-the-Sun Corridor, even with decreased staff members and reduced visitor services.

Rocky Mountain National Park is currently piloting a timed-entry system for park-wide access, with varying opportunities to other park destinations. Timed entry has spread, successfully, visitation throughout the day, decreased congestion, and reduced queuing at the entrance stations and parking lots.

The National Park Service is also working on several technological advances that will improve the visitor experience in parks through enhanced trip planning tools, including the new NPS mobile app and the Rec.gov improvements. In addition, the National Park Service’s “Plan Like a Park Ranger” campaign supports visitors by advising them to have backup plans, know in advance where reservations are needed, and by encouraging people to explore the lesser-known parks.

The National Park Service wants visitors to have an inspiring experience wherever they go in the National Park System. Given the iconic and finite nature of these highly valued places, the National Park Service is committed to collaborating with local communities, business, and non-profit partners to find solutions that improve the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, address congestion in a thoughtful way, and maintain the tremendous range of benefits the national parks provide.
Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer your questions and, just to remind you, Superintendent Schneider would be happy to answer specific questions about what’s going on in Acadia National Park. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Reynolds follows:]

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR INTERIOR REGIONS 6, 7 & 8, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, REGARDING THE IMPACTS OF OVERCROWDING IN OUR NATIONAL PARKS ON PARK RESOURCES AND VISITOR EXPERIENCES, AND TO CONSIDER STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT.

July 28, 2021

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the topic of the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences; and to consider strategic approaches to visitor use management.

This past year has reminded us how important national parks and public lands are to our overall wellbeing. Throughout the country, national parks and all public lands have provided close-to-home and destination-based opportunities for people to spend much needed time outdoors for their physical and psychological health. National parks are also places for people to connect with the inspirational wonders of nature and the stories that bond us to the meaningful places of this nation. It is no wonder that we have seen steady increases in visitation at many national parks and at all public lands across the country.

The National Park Service wants every visitor to have a great park experience. We seek ways to provide a range of opportunities that support more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive experiences that are compatible with the protection of the resources. It is exciting to see many new visitors exploring parks, with some camping or hiking for their very first time. Ensuring visitors have enjoyable experiences, however, is becoming increasingly challenging in our most popular parks.

**Park Congestion and Overcrowding**

There are 423 parks in the National Park System encompassing over 85 million acres across our nation, but visitation trends among the individual parks greatly vary. In 2020, overall visitation dropped by 90 million recreation visits, roughly 27.6%, to a 40-year low due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, one-third of the parks had at least one month of record visitation as people sought the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors.

Along with overall visitation numbers, changes are also occurring in visitation patterns. For example, many parks that used to experience a distinctive and quieter off-season no longer have one; their visitation numbers have largely remained steady or fluctuate only slightly in what used to be the shoulder season. Another example is the growing demand for campground reservations, which were up 73% across the system going into Memorial Day compared with 2019.
This year, based on the preliminary data we have available, overall visitation is increasing throughout most of the system. Similar to last year, it appears that half of all recreation visits are occurring at only the top 23 most-visited parks, with significant congestion conditions concentrated in the most popular 12 to 15 destination parks. Crowding conditions tend to happen at hotspots and where entries and exits are limited. Crowding can also be felt at the most popular scenic viewpoints that are within one-quarter mile of a parking lot.

**Addressing Park Congestion at Individual Parks**

The National Park Service is employing a range of strategies that are park-specific to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment while ensuring the protection of nationally significant resources. In addition to using pilot projects and flexible planning tools to test ideas, we are conducting robust public and stakeholder engagement before committing to long-term implementation. Our expanded social science research will also provide us with visitor information at the park level for visitor experience planning.

Some strategies for managing use have been used for decades. The National Park Service has long managed access in backcountry areas and wilderness, for example, by issuing trailhead and overnight permits. Permit systems for wilderness have helped preserve the qualities of solitude and minimize resource impacts.

To address vehicular congestion, the National Park Service has invested in multimodal transportation options such as shuttles and multi-use paths where biking and walking are encouraged. The National Park Service strategically supports the use of ride-hailing (Uber, Lyft, etc.), and micromobility options such as scooters, e-bikes, and bike-share where appropriate.

Parks are also working with local and regional tourism entities to develop strategies for promoting sustainable tourism and to coordinate messaging. We are working with the public, partners, and local communities and businesses to explore different tools and techniques that could help improve how visitors get to and experience popular features. Some parks are hosting mobile or pop-up visitor centers, increasing roving staff at key sites, designating new traffic configurations during peak visitation, and providing shuttle services.

Timed entry systems are now in place at several parks, with each addressing specific park-level issues. Muir Woods National Monument has used a successful concession-run timed-entry reservation system since the beginning of 2018. The year-round reservation system for all vehicle parking and shuttle riders is designed to provide for motorized vehicle access at levels that meet park goals for safety, resource protection, visitor experience, and public access while also ensuring the park is a good neighbor to nearby communities impacted by high visitation. Over the past three years, 96% of respondents to the concessioner’s customer satisfaction survey report a positive experience visiting Muir Woods.

In 2017, Acadia National Park’s visitation reached 3.5 million, an increase of 66% from ten years prior. The high volume of people visiting destinations along the Park Loop Road during peak times is causing gridlock, visitor conflicts, crowding, safety issues, resource damage, and of particular concern, delays in emergency response. Acadia implemented a vehicle reservation system, as approved in the May 2019 Transportation Plan, at Cadillac Summit Road during their
peak season, this year effective from May 26 to October 19. This system is enhanced by other visitor services, including by expanding the Island Explorer transit service and commercial tours. In addition, the Acadia Gateway Center, a transit hub and regional visitor center located outside of the park, will be constructed in partnership with the Maine Department of Transportation, Friends of Acadia, and the Federal Transit Administration.

Zion National Park implemented a temporary timed ticket system for the park shuttle system as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the ticket system assisted with managing large crowds and congested conditions while providing social distancing for visitors on shuttles and while waiting in queue lines to board the shuttles. Glacier National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park and Yosemite National Park have implemented reservation systems as pilot projects.

With the ticketed entry system, Glacier National Park estimates that the park has been able to adequately serve and support the same daily visitation on the Going-to-the-Sun Road corridor, even with decreased staff numbers and reduced visitor services. The system has also prevented the park from having to turn away visitors due to traffic congestion.

In 2020, Rocky Mountain National Park instituted a park-wide timed-entry system to provide visitors reasonable opportunity for social distancing during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The park is currently piloting an updated timed entry system for park-wide access with varying opportunities to all park destinations, including the highly popular Bear Lake corridor. Reservations are required on the Bear Lake Road Corridor between 5 am and 6 pm. In other parts of the park, reservations are required between 9 am and 3 pm. Timed entry has successfully spread visitation throughout the day, decreased congestion, and reduced queuing at entrance stations and parking lots.

Yosemite National Park’s day-use reservation system was originally developed for 2020 to reduce risk of the spread of COVID-19. The current reservation period began May 21, 2021 and will run through September 30, 2021. In addition to reducing traffic and parking lot congestion the park has also seen a decrease in visitor complaints about Yosemite Valley traffic, which used to be common. Since 2010, Yosemite has also used a permit system for the Half Dome cable system, part of the Half Dome Trail, which is in designated wilderness. Permits for day hikers are distributed by lottery through Recreation.gov, with one preseason lottery and daily lotteries during the hiking season. Unregulated use in previous years caused crowding and long lines at the base, summit, and cables, resulting in an undesirable visitor experience and safety concerns, including six significant falls between 2006-2009.

**Encouraging Advance Trip Planning**
The National Park Service is working on several technological advances that will improve the visitor experience in parks through enhanced trip-planning tools. These efforts will expand access to recreational opportunities and coordinate data with other land management bureaus to allow for consistent communications with the public. To advance this effort, we are currently researching and piloting a number of traffic collection and analysis projects at both the statewide and park level with the goal of better understanding traffic volumes as well as where visitors are coming from and going to.
We are also collaborating with the other federal land managers to align and expand our recreation-based web information to allow for data consistency between federal websites. This data is also available to our partners, third parties and the tourism industry. Rec.gov is a one-stop reservation and trip planning service for the public and a centralized management system for facility managers. This contract-delivered service, administered by the U.S. Forest Service, provides reservation and trip planning capabilities to 12 federal agencies, and features more than 110,000 individual sites and activities across 4,000 recreation areas. The platform, launched in 2018, offers expanded features to improve the customer experience through visitor mapping and trip planning tools that allow visitors to discover locations and activities new to them, especially when their chosen sites are already reserved. The rec.gov mobile app offers visitors the convenience of making and managing reservations on the go.

Visitors to national parks have a new tool to assist them in their trip planning. The National Park Service Mobile App, launched in April during National Park Week. The app ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. It currently offers interactive maps, tours, accessibility information, and more. The app is built to be used even in remote parks where internet access may be limited by allowing visitors to download information to their phone in advance.

In addition, the National Park Service’s #PlanLikeAParkRanger campaign, launched in May, shares insider tips from park rangers so visitors can better prepare for their national park experience. It points prospective visitors to park websites and resources like the National Park Service Mobile App that have recommendations about where to go, what to see and do, how to take care of these special places during their visit, and what is needed to include in trip planning. It advises visitors to know in advance where and when reservations are needed, be flexible and have backup plans, allow extra time to get from one place to another, where pets are or are not allowed, and encourages people to explore lesser-known parks.

**Conclusion**

The National Park Service wants visitors to have a high-quality experience everywhere they go in the National Park System. Parks are working to offer new ways for people to receive timely information to better plan and enjoy their trips. The National Park Service is committed to collaborating with local communities, businesses, and nonprofit partners to find solutions that improve the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, address crowding and congestion in a thoughtful way, and maintain the tremendous range of benefits that national parks provide. Given the iconic and finite nature of these highly valued places, along with the complexity of providing inclusive and high-quality visitor opportunities, creativity, active collaboration, and shared responsibility will be essential for building sustainable and effective strategies.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.
OPENING STATEMENT OF KRISTEN BRENGEL, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS, NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Ms. BRENGEL. Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you for the invitation to discuss overcrowding within our popular national parks with the Subcommittee today. I am Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs at the National Parks Conservation Association.

There is no greater testament to the success of the National Park System than the ongoing interest that visitors pay to the 423 sites. In 2019 alone, parks had 327 million visits. These visitors——

Senator KING. I would point out, Ms. Brengel, by the way, that is almost exactly the entire population of the United States.

Ms. BRENGEL. That was in my testimony.

Senator KING. Oh, sorry.

[Laughter.]

Ms. BRENGEL. Yes, a lot of people. These visitors are evidence of the success of the Federal Government in protecting locations that are both valued by the public and deserving of national park designation. However, the growth in visitation is also posing one of the greatest challenges NPS has ever faced.

In 2019, before the pandemic, overall visitation to the system was nearly 20 percent greater than it was in 2013. This visitation increase will likely continue into the future. For instance, Yellowstone National Park reported a 40 percent jump in visitation in April. Arches is so popular the park has to close the gate on a daily basis. Zion can have a four-hour wait to access popular trailheads.

We are concerned for the natural and cultural resources that the Park Service is empowered to preserve—for instance, Rocky Mountain. Visitors are spreading out beyond existing trails, increasing wildlife disruption, especially with elk and moose. Arches and Canyonlands—there has been more vandalism, particularly defacing of indigenous rock imagery.

Traffic gridlock, long lines for basic services, and crowding in the most popular attractions can result in unpleasant trips. Upticks in graffiti, litter, social trails, and improperly disposed of human waste are concerns in many parks. This undesirable and harmful behavior suggests unprepared visitors are recreating in parks and evidences a need for more interaction with park rangers to educate visitors.

Some visitor use management strategies that Mike talked about and I’ll expand on are permits and reservations—managing the number of visitors entering a park or part of a park at a given time of day or days of week via prearranged reservations on Recreation.gov; messaging and communication; encouraging pre-visit planning, which is really important; infrastructure and facilities—managing visitor movement or behavior by expanding or adjusting hardened facilities, like roads, trails, parking lots, visitor centers, and restrooms; and transportation—requiring bus or shuttle ridership, improving foot and bicycle traffic, and managing parking lots.

None of these are new concepts. Many of these tools are used effectively already and some of the reservation systems that are in
place right now, like Yosemite Valley—it’s far less congested right now. Bear Lake at Rocky is easier to get around, and traffic is moving along better at Glacier. These tools need to be refined and adjusted based on the parks specifically that we’re talking about.

Other issues that we’re concerned about and we hope we can address with the Committee are equity issues. We believe the Park Service needs to critically examine making parks more welcoming and relevant for black, indigenous, and people of color. In this regard, we think safety needs to be reviewed. Language and communication—right now, most of the communication in parks is offered only in English. And fees—research suggests increasing user fees is not an effective strategy for addressing increased visitation and can actually pose a barrier that would disproportionally impact low-income populations.

One area that we also think we should look at is collaboration. Close and innovative collaboration needs to take place between parks, future visitors of parks, current visitors of parks, local communities, philanthropic partners, and concessioners.

Staffing—between 2011 and 2019, NPS lost 16 percent of its staff capacity. The result is that staff take on multiple collateral duties. It’s not uncommon to find trail crews attending to busy restrooms or law enforcement helping with parking. It’s a huge problem.

Dispersing visitors—dispersal could happen either regionally or within a park unit itself. When visitors spread out along these locations, it could cause unintended consequences that we weren’t prepared for. For instance, visitors who are encountering a temporary delay at Arches are making their way to Canyonlands. Now Canyonlands is very busy and is taking 30 minutes or more to get into. Shifting traffic and crowding is not improving the visitor experience in these parks.

Search and rescue has also increased with the visitation increases. This has become a huge problem in so many parks, and I’m sure Mike could expand on this. Park visitors could access terrain that they’re not equipped for, which adds to staffing and financial burdens in parks that we’re trying to make sure are managed well.

In conclusion, we appreciate the Committee’s oversight on the impacts of overcrowding. I look forward to speaking with you more about it and hope that we can take a look at the impacts and the challenges with climate change, outdated infrastructure, and increased visitation as issues that we really need to address moving forward in Congress.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Brengel follows:]
Testimony of
Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs
National Parks Conservation Association for the
National Parks Subcommittee of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
July 28th, 2021

Chairman King and Ranking Member Daines, thank you for the invitation to discuss overcrowding within our popular national parks with the subcommittee today. I am Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). NPCA is the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System with nearly 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide.

We are pleased to share our views about the hurdles overcrowding presents to the National Park System. It was only five years ago that we celebrated the 100th anniversary of this incredible agency, the people who have powered it and the parks we cherish. During the celebration, we witnessed the admiration Americans have for their national parks—from the spectacular views of Acadia’s coast and the jagged peaks of the Tetons to the stories of our cultural heritage including the indigenous history preserved at Mesa Verde, the suffragettes at Belmont-Paul and the tragedies at Manzanar. We rely on national parks to be our retreats and our national memory—to be storytellers and protectors of nature and its sights, sounds and health.

The National Park Service (NPS) strives to uphold its mission to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” From the designation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 to the creation of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve just last year, the National Park System has continued growing to guarantee that all American’s can access their natural and cultural heritage. Park resources are preserved in perpetuity by the National Park Service staff who work every day to make certain that the American public can learn from, enjoy, and be inspired by some of the most breathtaking vistas and stories that exist anywhere in the world. These national parks tell diverse and impactful stories about who we are as a nation, and range from the craggy rocks of Maine in the east, to the sandy shores of Gaum in the west, and hundreds of special places in between. No greater testament to the success of the National Park System can be cited than the ongoing interest visitors pay to these 423 sites. In 2019 alone, 327.5 million visits were made to the park system, which nearly equals the entire population of the United States. These visitors are evidence of the success of the federal government in protecting locations that are both valued by the public and deserving of national park designation.
However, the growth in visitation at our popular national parks is also posing one of the greatest challenges that NPS has ever faced.

In 2019, the last year on record before the pandemic started, overall visitation in the National Park System was nearly 20 percent greater than what it was in 2013. In 2019, the Congressional Research Service estimated that the NPS staff size shrank nearly 14 percent compared to just a decade earlier. The decline in staffing capacity and park funding over the last ten years give us a sobering view of the ability of NPS to successfully respond to these rapidly evolving visitor use patterns. There is no reason to believe increased visitation will let up anytime soon, especially as Americans and international visitors seem more eager than ever to recreate outdoors.

As the initial COVID-19 restrictions lifted nationally last spring, many Americans gravitated to the outdoors. Local parks and trails became critical for the public’s health and well-being. As people ventured further from home with limited international travel, it was no surprise when they started flocking to national parks, and gathering in large numbers at popular destinations. This volume of people was widely covered in the media, and while the National Park System experienced an overall decrease in visitation in 2020 compared to 2019, this represents a notable exception to the general trend of steadily increasing visitation to NPS units nationwide, particularly over the past decade.

As previously mentioned, NPS received a total of 327.5 million recreation visits in 2019, an increase of more than 9 million, or 2.9 percent, from the previous year. The overall 2020 visitation numbers reflect the effects of temporary park closures and restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but—importantly—many parks continued to experience surges in visitation when parks reopened at the end of the summer into the fall. Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore had a 41 percent increase in visits from July to October. Yellowstone hit a record high in October and Zion documented seven consecutive months of record visitation starting in September, again during a time of almost non-existent international travel.

Many superintendents are already in the midst of yet another season of exploding visitation with many of the same staffing limitations as 2020. In April of this year, Yellowstone National Park reported a 40% jump in visitation. Arches National Park is having to turn away visitors on a nearly daily basis, and Canyonlands National Park has already seen a 45% jump in visitation this summer. Grand Teton National Park set an all-time monthly visitation record in May and Zion National Park alerted travelers of a 4 hour wait time to access popular trailheads. While NPS released the “Plan like a Ranger” campaign earlier this year that will help educate visitors on ways to reduce some of the tensions that come with such high visitation, many parks this summer will almost certainly continue to deal with a visitor base that remains unaware of the hurdles they will face when accessing a popular park.
While year-to-year visitation at a particular park unit may be influenced by seasonal weather variability, regional economic outlook, or even local promotional campaigns, NPS ensures consistent visitation data collection year-to-year that allows park managers to analyze larger trends of visitation. When examined critically, the experience of many parks during the past year fit a pattern of exponential growth in visitation, after considering the temporary downturn in visitors caused by the pandemic. Left unmanaged, the crowds that naturally come with such high visitation might unintentionally hinder the ability of the NPS to uphold its conservation mission to protect and preserve park resources as outlined in the Organic Act of 1916.

While visitation has generally increased across the entire National Park System, there are certain iconic parks experiencing such rapid visitation growth that we should be concerned about natural and cultural resource protection. For instance, Rocky Mountain National Park has been concerned about the growing pressures put on the fragile high alpine terrain by visitors packing onto Trail Ridge Road. The heavy concentration of visitors to these beautiful places has not only led to visitors spreading out beyond existing trails, it has also increased concerns about wildlife disruption, with elk and moose being pushed from natural habitat corridors. In Acadia National Park, wildflowers and sensitive sub-alpine vegetation was repeatedly damaged as heavy foot traffic impacted trail systems and cars parked illegally off-road at trailheads. Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and surrounding areas have seen multiple, high-profile cases of vandalism of cultural sites, particularly defacement of Indigenous rock imagery.

Further, many parks are seeing such large crowds that the visitor experience could easily be diminished. Traffic gridlock, long lines for basic services, and crowding at the parks’ most popular attractions and services can result in unpleasant trips to some of our nation’s most cherished places. Alongside crowding, increased visitation has resulted in alarming upticks in graffiti, litter, social trailing and improperly disposed-of human waste in parks. This undesirable and harmful visitor behavior suggests unprepared visitors are recreating in parks and evidences a need for more opportunities for visitors to interact with rangers and encounter effective educational messaging. These can and should be addressed through outreach, education and active visitor use management.

It has become increasingly clear that some parks have reached, and other parks have surpassed, their limits for balancing increased visitation and protecting resources. At this subset of parks, active management tools are needed to protect park resources in perpetuity. The changing nature of visits and visitors to parks due to the pandemic, increasing types of recreation, climate change, extended shoulder seasons and shrinking off-seasons, and the increase in remote work opportunities mean many parks are likely to continue to see increasing visitation in the coming years. Amidst inadequate budgets for park planning and a priority to help new, young and diverse audiences discover their parks, NPS must increase their ability to
actively manage visitor use across the system in order to meet one of the greatest challenges facing NPS in its second century.

**Visitor use management strategies**

As outdoor recreation continues to grow across the country and become a larger portion of our economies, parks are front and center in attracting visitors to communities around the country. Those same parks must be able to put equitable and effective visitor use management plans in place to protect park natural and cultural resources while also advancing positive visitor experiences. Failure to do so might negatively impact the long-term viability of the park to attract the visitation that has long been found to boost local economies. To best protect the visitor experience and park resources, parks across the country employ a range of systems and tools to manage the impacts of visitors on natural and cultural resources, facilities, and staff capacity. (See Appendix A: Working List of Examples of Active Visitor Use Management in Parks). These systems include:

- **Permits and reservations:** Managing the number of visitors entering a park or part of a park at a given point (time of day, day of the week/month, time of year) via pre-arranged reservations including lotteries.
- **Messaging and communications:** Managing visitors’ expectations and encouraging pre-visit planning or adjusting plans via extensive outreach before and during a park visit.
- **Infrastructure and facilities:** Managing visitor movement or behavior by expanding or adjusting hardened facilities including roads, trails, parking lots, visitor centers and restrooms.
- **Transportation:** Managing how visitors get into and move around a park by allowing or requiring bus or shuttle ridership, improving foot and bicycle traffic, and managing parking areas.

These management techniques not only reduce crowded areas within parks, but they lessen the environmental impacts that we know come with visitor density. Carefully planned active visitor use management can reduce air and noise pollution, reduce disruption to wildlife, and further protect soils and vegetation. As such, adaptable visitor use management systems are a valuable tool to managers in a changing climate. These systems also reduce strain on park facilities and staff, giving them the time necessary to complete the primary responsibilities for which they were hired. These systems and tools can also benefit the park employee daily experience. For example, enhanced mass transit into a park reduces congestion for employees getting to work. Where reservations are employed, gateway communities can benefit from consistency of visitation throughout a season.
In addition to preventing and mitigating impacts, active visitor use management tools and systems can meaningfully enhance park experiences. For instance, employing permits and reservations to manage for a specific number of people in a park or location at one time results in easier access to parking and facilities and increased visitor interaction with park rangers (who help form a connection between visitors and resources and inspire stewardship behavior). In places like Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park, reservation systems have reduced crowding and vehicle density. At Rocky Mountain National Park, the pilot timed-entry reservation system resulted in less crowded trails. These systems result in a better visitor experience, as a lack of crowds allows for less obstructed views, easier access to points of interest, reduced time spent in traffic and waiting in line and prevent visitors from being turned away at the gate when parks are full. National Park Service leadership should ensure that park managers have the resources necessary to effectively study the social science that will lead to the best possible management systems for a specific park unit.

We appreciate that these are not new concepts, and many of these tools were used effectively throughout the pandemic. Yosemite and Rocky Mountain utilized entrance reservation systems through recreation.gov. Visitors pick a date and receive an email with their reservation to show the rangers at the entrance stations. Rocky Mountain had already conducted a visitor capacity survey prior to the pandemic and was able to identify daily entrance limits that allowed social distancing at popular sites. At Zion National Park, it was important to continue operation of shuttle buses into Zion Canyon where there is extremely limited parking, but these buses operated at reduced capacity to maintain distance between visitors. NPS utilized recreation.gov to reserve shuttle bus tickets for several months. Each of these reservation systems allowed visitors to have certainty while traveling more safely and responsibly to these popular parks. The application of these tools in response to the pandemic gave NPS insight into how quickly the public can adapt to reservation systems and how to improve the systems in response to public feedback. This can also be useful when international visitors start returning to parks, which will continue to be a major factor as travel restrictions lift. Finally, these systems can be applicable in a wide variety of parks, but park managers need continued support to study and deploy these systems to ensure that park resources receive the protection they deserve.

**Equity**

An area of visitor management that will require NPS’s critical examination and deliberate solutions is the impact of active visitor use management on people who have been historically disenfranchised and underrepresented in parks. Making national parks welcoming and relevant for Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) and young people must continue to be part of the NPS vision in this second century. Employing an equitable access lens may well help us identify solutions that address visitor use management and enhance equity. Significant areas of equitable access to explore include:
- **Ability to Plan**: More research is needed on people’s ability to plan their visits to parks and options for mitigating any barriers.

- **Enforcement**: Perception of safety in parks, as in all other places in society, fundamentally affect visitors’ experiences, and we must incorporate and prioritize safety and perceptions of safety for BIPOC visitors as we work on visitor use management.

- **Expectations**: More research and targeted community engagement is needed to understand how perceptions of visitor use management systems affect expectations of the park visit and what can be done to influence intention to visit.

- **Language**: More research is needed to inform best practices and resources needed for making communication about visitor use management available in a multitude of languages and cultural communication contexts. Even now, many of the systems necessary for park visitors to plan adequately are only offered in English.

- **Finances**: Research suggests that increasing user fees is not an effective strategy for addressing increased visitation and overcrowding. Instead, implementing or increasing visitor fees only changes who can access those spaces and potentially poses barriers that disproportionately impact or exclude low-income populations. We should invest in non-fee related visitor use management options to ensure that access to parks remains part of the American vision of shared heritage for all to benefit from.

- **Location and Transportation**: Research shows that location and transportation are two related structural barriers that result in reduced access to nature-based parks for people of color compared to white visitors. Location and ease and variety of transportation options should be assessed to assure equitable access to parks and determine suitability for permits and reservations.

- **Technology**: Many messaging, communications, permits, and reservations tools require visitors to have access to reliable technology and the knowledge to navigate online systems. The research on digital literacy gaps in a park-specific context is lacking and further research in this area is needed.

Close and innovative collaboration is needed to navigate an interdependent dynamic between parks, visitors, future visitors, communities, philanthropic partners and concessioners. Supporting collaborative processes and clear communication with visitors and communities will lead to productive, inclusive work on visitor use management, as has been the case in places like Acadia National Park. Collaboration should be done early and often to support efficacious visitor use management policy, ensure landscape-level resource protection, and uphold principles of equity, inclusion and justice.
We recommend vetting reservation systems, studying the application of recreation ecology science, and enhancing NPS’ capacity (staff, training, equipment) for conducting good social science and using it in adaptive management. These focus areas will underpin a robust set of NPS policies and practices to support sustainable visitor use management so that the parks continue to represent a democratic vision of accessibility for all.

**Funding challenges**

NPCA’s long standing priority of advocating for adequate funding for park operations to improve and maintain infrastructure and add staff for interpretation, search and rescue, law enforcement, resource management — including social science monitoring and data collection – can help address the challenges of high visitation. Between 2011 and 2019, NPS lost 16 percent of its staff capacity while at the same time struggling to accommodate a 17 percent increase in visitation. Robust funding would help fill vacant positions, support efforts to address visitor use and climate change, and make progress on diversifying the NPS workforce.

There are thousands of vacant positions across the agency and park system, from maintenance to interpreters, historians, social scientists and more. Record visitation compounds the impacts of understaffing, as staff take on multiple collateral duties and attempt to keep up with crowds to ensure adequate visitor services. It is not uncommon, for example, to find trail crews attending to busy restrooms, or law enforcement officers helping with parking. In Yosemite, there aren’t enough staff to keep the restrooms in the valley clean during the day.

While dispersing visitors has been suggested as another potential technique to reduce the impacts of crowd density within a park, NPCA has concerns that NPS underfunding and understaffing will present challenges to ensure dispersal is managed properly. Dispersal could happen either regionally, with visitors being dispersed to additional national parks or public lands, or it could happen within a specific park unit, with visitors being spread out across additional locations that receive less visitor use. Both strategies could lead to unintended consequences if not handled or studied carefully. For instance, visitors who are encountering a temporarily delayed entry at Arches National Park are making their way in large numbers to nearby Canyonlands National Park’s Island in the Sky district and increasingly the more remote Needles district. The wait to enter Canyonlands Island in the Sky district is stretching to thirty minutes or more, a big change from years past, and the park is seeing record numbers of visitors month after month. In June, visitation to the Island in the Sky district was up 62.5 percent from June 2020 and the Needles district was up 146 percent. This is just shifting traffic and crowding not improving visitor experience.

While record-setting visitation for a historically less-visited park may seem on the surface to be a good thing, parks like Canyonlands are not sufficiently resourced, especially in terms of staff, to serve so many visitors. As park superintendents have told us, increased visitation has
also led to increased search and rescue needs. If dispersal is increased, park visitors could access terrain that they are not equipped for, which could add to the staffing and financial burdens that parks are already trying to manage. Even if visitors are encouraged to explore front-country sites, the park must ensure that there are adequate staff and facilities to guarantee that the visitor experience is maintained and that park resources can be best protected.

Staff are already pressed by increased search and rescue operations, heavy use of facilities in need of constant maintenance (e.g., restrooms) and the sheer task of serving public information needs at entrance stations and visitor centers. These demands on staff time for basic operations leaves almost no time available for visitor education about park resources and stories and stewardship behavior, which are key responsibilities of the park. While dispersal might provide some relief to parks that are experiencing the brunt of the crowds, it has to be further studied and the financial and human resource costs must be considered before implementation.

Additional funding to return staff to our parks is also an opportunity to diversify the National Park Service, which is challenged by a significant lack of racial, gender, and ethnic diversity. The vast majority of NPS staff, 83 percent, are white, a percentage significantly higher than other federal agencies, while more than three in five are men. The lack of ethnic and racial diversity among park staff is cited as one reason that people of color comprise a disproportionately low percentage of park visitors. For example, only two percent of national park visitors are African American. Bringing rangers back to our parks and ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce while doing so, can help make more Americans feel welcome in their parks.

Conclusion

We appreciate the committee’s oversight on the impacts overcrowding presents to some of our most precious natural and cultural treasures. Now, as we continue to grapple with the pandemic and get our country back on its feet, we should take the time to address longstanding planning, monitoring and funding issues within the National Park Service. The issues that face the National Park Service today are multifaceted, requiring a nuanced and technical response that NPS has the expertise to employ. The intersectional challenges of climate change, outdated infrastructure, and increased visitation on our public lands, demand a coordinated response. The committee should make sure the next National Park Service Director has a vision for addressing the depth of the issues discussed here today. As the National Park Service prepares for its next one-hundred years of preservation and education, the challenges that must be addressed are unlike any that have been navigated previously. We applaud the committee and NPS’ commitment to ensuring that the full American story can be experienced by generations to come.
Appendix A: Working List of Examples of Active Visitor Use Management in Parks

Permits and reservations — Managing the number of visitors entering a park or part of a park at a given point (time of day, day of the week/month, time of year) via pre-arranged reservations (including lotteries)

Park Entrance
- Timed-entry reservations
  - Rocky Mountain National Park, summer/fall 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Day use entry reservations
  - Yosemite National Park, summer/fall 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Shuttle Tickets
  - Zion National Park, 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Parking reservations
  - Muir Woods National Monument, year-round required effective 2018
- Parking capacity gate closures
  - Arches National Park, episodic

Destination/Experience
- Location- and time-bound reservations
  - Cadillac Mountain, Ocean Drive Corridor — Acadia National Park, October 2020 pilot
  - Haleakalā Summit Sunrise — Haleakalā National Park
  - Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell — Independence National Historical Park
  - Rapidan Camp — Shenandoah National Park,
  - USS Arizona Memorial — World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument
  - Statue of Liberty Crown and Pedestal — Statue of Liberty National Monument
- Wilderness and backcountry permits (lottery and advanced reservation)
  - Half Dome Cables — Yosemite National Park
  - Zion Wilderness Reservations and Permits — Zion National Park

Ranger-Guided Experience
- Cave tours
  - Lehman Caves tours — Great Basin National Park
  - Timpanogos Cave National Monument Tours
  - Carlsbad Caverns National Park Tours
- Boat tours
  - Cruises — Voyageurs National Park
  - Ranger-Guided Canoe Tour — Congaree National Park
- Other guided tours
  - Cliff dwelling and backcountry tours — Mesa Verde National Park

Messaging and communications — Managing visitors’ expectations and encouraging pre-visit planning (or adjusting plans) via extensive outreach before and during a park visit

Real-Time
• Real-time communication platforms
  • Recreation Access Dashboard (RAD) - Glacier National Park
• Visitor smartphone app
  • Zion National Park, in development

Dispersion Messaging
• Mount Rainier: Off the Beaten Path — Mount Rainier National Park
• Greater Zion — Greater Zion Convention and Tourism Office

Stewardship Education
• Zero Landfill Initiative — Denali, Grand Teton and Yosemite National Parks

Transportation — Managing how visitors get into and move around a park by allowing or requiring bus or shuttle ridership, foot/bicycle traffic, etc. (i.e., not individual vehicles)

Shuttles and Buses
• Critical access most of the year to most of the park, concessioner managed, fee required
  • Denali Park Road bus — Denali National Park
• Critical access most of the year for most visitors, NPS managed, free access
  • Zion Canyon shuttle — Zion National Park
• Supplementary access during peak times of year, NPS managed, free access
  • Shuttle — Rocky Mountain National Park
  • Shuttle — Yosemite National Park
  • Shuttle — Grand Canyon National Park

Boats
• Critical access to boat-accessed park sites, concessioner managed, fee required
  • Statue of Liberty National Monument
  • Alcatraz Island National Monument
  • Resurrection Bay boat tours — Kenai Fjords National Park

Infrastructure and facilities — Managing visitor movement or behavior by expanding or adjusting hardened facilities (e.g., roads, trails, parking lots, visitor services, restrooms)
Senator King. Thank you very much. Now I would like to ask Mr. Kevin Gartland, the Executive Director of Whitefish Chamber of Commerce—Whitefish, Montana, I might add—and Mr. Gartland, we would like to hear from you about the impacts of this phenomenon in your region. Thank you.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. KEVIN O. GARTLAND, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WHITEFISH, MONTANA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Mr. Gartland. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members. I do appreciate the opportunity to talk with you a little bit today about what is really becoming a very serious concern to us here.

Glacier, for Northwestern Montana, specifically Whitefish and our gateway communities, really is the goose that lays the golden egg, and we treasure it, and we do a lot to protect it. Just for background, Whitefish is a mountain resort town located about 25 miles west of the western gate to Glacier National Park.

Our organization represents about 500 small businesses in the gateway communities of West Glacier, Coram, Hungry Horse, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish. And as we are primarily a business organization, I will begin by telling you that business is booming this summer. I spoke with the leader of our local CDB yesterday. He tells me that hotel reservations in the month of June were up seven percent from 2019, which was our previous record-breaking year. And if you take a look at what's happening in the short-term rental market, there's probably double the number of units out there that there were two years ago and their occupancy rates are skyrocketing too. So I would estimate that occupancy in the valley during the first month of our summer season was up by 15 to 20 percent. Passenger traffic at Glacier Park International Airport was up nearly 30 percent from 2019's all-time high during the month of June.

So if anything, business is a little bit too good right now. There aren't enough workers to fill the jobs available, so business owners are leaving some money on the table this summer. Limited operations really are the catchwords of the day. Most everybody in the hospitality industry, and outside of the industry as well, is struggling to find employees, running on limited operations—75 to 80 percent of capacity. And that's anything from mom-and-pop restaurants to hotels, lodges, up to Whitefish Mountain Resort—our ski resort that has major summertime operations. There are a lot of reasons for that, but we're not here to talk about that exactly.

Despite that, it's safe to say 2021 will be the busiest ever for tourism in our region and the busiest ever for Glacier National Park as well. That, of course, is nothing new. Visitation to Glacier has been setting all-time records for most of the ten years I've been here in town. In the world of business, that's a pretty good thing. You simply gear up production to meet the demand that you've got out there and everybody's happy. Unfortunately, in managing natural resources—in this case, a national park—it's not just the law of supply and demand that applies. There are also a myriad of other issues to consider, as you folks have already talked about, in-
cluding the quality of the visitor experience and the carrying capacity of the land itself.

In an effort to kind of manage the overcrowding we’ve seen recently in Glacier and maintain that visitor experience, the park this year instituted the “Ticketed Entry Reservation System” for the most popular area of the park, which is the Going-to-the-Sun Road corridor. Oddly enough, it’s really the system itself this year that has been the worst part of the visitor experience in Glacier, at least for those that weren’t able to get that $2 ticket.

The fact that the new system was rolled out very late in the game, just a couple of months before the summer crush hit, caused a lot of confusion and frustration, not only among visitors who were attempting to purchase tickets but for employees of local businesses and folks like us at the visitor information center who have literally been getting hammered by tourists all summer long who’ve traveled thousands of miles. They’ve paid tens of thousands of dollars in hotel and airfare and rental car reservations, only to see their vacation ruined because they can’t get that $2 ticket to see Glacier National Park.

There are lots of experiences I could tell you about, but one businesswoman put it to me last Friday like this: She feels more like she’s a therapist than a marketing director this year. She’s really trying to help people work through that issue, and it’s become a big deal.

In terms of visitor experience, I think you really have to consider three different groups—visitors who are able to get a ticket; visitors who aren’t; and then the residents of our area, the gateway communities, who live and work in this area 365 days a year, in part because they want to be able to enjoy the park on a regular basis.

By all accounts, the entry system has relieved a bit of the overcrowding we’ve seen in the last few years. That’s a plus for those able to get into the park. It’s still extremely difficult to find a parking space at major tourist attractions and trailheads. But it is possible to find pullouts and places to get out of your vehicle, take a short hike, have a picnic lunch, take some photos, and relax and enjoy the park.

I was there on the 5th of July—don’t ask me why, but I was—and we were able to find some parking spaces where we could get out and enjoy the park—not at Avalanche and not at Logan Pass. But throughout the park, it seems to be a little bit less congested during the peak daytime hours.

You know, it’s also a given that the Glacier experience is quite different than it was 10 or 20 years ago. It is very difficult to get off the beaten path this time of year in Glacier. The most popular trails are always crowded. The trail at Avalanche Lake is often described as a pack train of people moving up and down the mountain. Simply getting to the trailhead can be a bit harrowing. I talked to a local guide last week. He said, “It’s like the Indy 500 on Going-to-the-Sun Road at 6:00 in the morning,” as visitors come into to beat that 6:00 time restriction for the ticketed entry and really race to get up the highway to get to that favored destination as quickly as they can.
Even so, I would say the majority of folks who are able to get into the park are having a good experience and better than those who are unable to do it and get that $2 ticket. But I will tell you again, trying to help folks manage their vacation has become the most difficult thing we’ve ever had to deal with in terms of dealing with our visitors.

The third group of customers is locals—and I know my time is over, Mr. Chairman. I’ll try to wrap things up pretty quickly here. Locals are feeling like they’ve been left out. These folks live and work here. They have park passes and they’re competing with three million other people to get a limited number of daily tickets to get into the park when they can. I think something needs to be done about that.

Overall, the business community is feeling the system needs some tweaking, but it is leading to a better experience for the visiting public. And in terms of alternatives, which we’ll talk about, we don’t want to see a return to unrestricted access, which we’ve had to this point. In 2018, 2019, and last year, there were times when we were at full capacity. The park could not carry anyone else and so the front gates were shut down for hours at a time—three, four hours. Traffic backed up into West Glacier onto Highway 2, and folks couldn’t access those businesses. That actually did impact business. The way we’ve done it this year, folks are able to access those businesses in our gateway communities and I don’t think they’re seeing a negative impact from that.

Public transportation—I’m sure we can talk about that a little bit.

I would just kind of close by saying that business owners here in Whitefish and in northwestern Montana are like any others. They’re here to make a profit, but they also have a very strong sense of ownership and stewardship for the park. They believe it should be protected and preserved, not exploited. Again, the phrase we hear is “We’re loving the park to death.” And whether you’re doing that or you’re killing the goose that laid the golden egg, we have to balance the good aspects of bringing more business to our community with, really, ruining the experience that we have in Glacier. And I think that’s where we have the challenge moving forward for the next five to ten years.

I would be happy to discuss anything you guys would like to discuss. Lots of issues out there. We appreciate the work of the Park Service and Superintendent Mow has tried to work with the business community over the years. One of the aspects of managing tourists is getting them to enjoy the area outside of the park as well. We’ve done a lot of different things in that regard that I’d be happy to talk about if you’re interested.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gartland follows:]
United States Senate
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks

The Impacts of Overcrowding in Our National Parks on Park Resources and Visitor Experiences, and to Consider Strategic Approaches to Visitor Use Management

July 28, 2021

Kevin O. Garland
Executive Director, Whitefish, MT Chamber of Commerce

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and subcommittee members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the issue of national park overcrowding, the effect it is having on park resources and visitor experiences, and what — if anything — is to be done about it.

Whitefish is a mountain resort town located about 25 miles west of the entrance to Glacier National Park. Our organization represents about 500 small businesses in the “gateway” communities of West Glacier, Coram, Hungry Horse, Columbia Falls and Whitefish … and as we are primarily a business organization, let me begin by telling you that business is booming.

If anything, it’s too good — there aren’t enough workers to fill the jobs available, so business owners are leaving money on the table. “Limited operations” are the order of the day, with most everyone in the hospitality industry — from restaurants, bars and hotels to major attractions like Whitefish Mountain Resort — running at about 75-80 percent capacity.

Despite that, it’s safe to say that 2021 will be the busiest ever for tourism in our region, and the busiest ever for Glacier National Park. That’s nothing new; visitation to Glacier has set a new “all-time” record nearly every year for the last five years. In the world of business, that’s a very good thing … you simply gear-up production to meet the increased demand, and everybody’s happy. Unfortunately, in managing natural resources — in this case, a national park — it’s not just the law of supply and demand that applies. There are also a myriad of other issues to consider, including the quality of the visitor experience and the “carrying capacity” of the park itself.

In an effort to manage overcrowding and maintain a quality visitor experience, Glacier National Park this year instituted a “Ticketed Entry Reservation System” for the most popular area of the park — the Going-to-the-Sun Road corridor. Oddly enough, it’s the system itself that has been the worst part of the visitor experience in Glacier this summer … at least for those who’ve been unable to get a $2 ticket.

The fact that the new reservation system was rolled out late in the game — just months before the summer crush — caused confusion and frustration not only among visitors attempting to purchase the tickets, but for employees of local businesses — and Visitor Info Centers — who have literally been getting “hammered” by tourists who’ve travelled thousands of miles and spent tens of thousands of dollars,
only to have their vacation ruined because they can’t get their hands on a $2 ticket to see Glacier. One local worker put it this way: “I feel more like a therapist than I do a marketing director.”

In terms of Visitor Experience, I believe you really have to consider the experience of at least three different types of customers: visitors who were able to get a ticket; visitors who weren’t; and the residents of gateway communities who live and work in this area so they can enjoy the park on a regular basis.

By all accounts, the ticketed entry system has relieved a bit of the overcrowding we’ve seen in the last few years, and that’s a plus for those able to get into the park. While it is still extremely difficult to find parking space at the major tourist attractions and trailheads, it is possible to find pullouts and places to get out of your vehicle, have a picnic lunch, take some photos and enjoy the scenery.

It’s also a given that the “Glacier Experience” is far different today than it was 10-15 years ago. These days it’s tough to get off the beaten path. The most popular trails are always crowded, with the trail to Avalanche Lake often described as a “pack train of people” making its way up-and-down the mountain. And simply getting to the trailhead can be a harrowing experience. Once local guide told me – only half-jokingly – that “it’s like the Indy 500 on Going-to-the-Sun Road at 6 a.m.,” as visitors race to get a parking spot before they’re all taken.

Even so, the majority of folks who are able to gain entry to the park are having a good experience ... far better than those who’ve been unable to maneuver the system and get that golden $2 ticket. At the Whitefish Visitor Center, we have spent the last four months trying to explain the Ticketed Entry System to folks trying to plan – or salvage – their summer vacations. It is the single most difficult issue we’ve ever had to help people deal with.

The third group of “customers” whose experience is important to the conversation are the locals ... the people who live and work in the area, both in and out of the tourist trade. These local residents – the annual pass holders who visit the park regularly with family and friends – feel that they’ve been “left out” of the process ... left to compete with the 3 million visitors who’re vying to get their hands on a limited number of daily passes.

But even with all that said, the overall consensus of the business community is that – while the system definitely needs tweaking -- it is leading to a better experience for the visiting public.

In terms of alternatives to ticketed entry, there simply aren’t that many.

Returning to “unrestricted” access during the peak summer season simply isn’t an option. Business owners do not want to return to 2015 and 2020, when the park reached “peak capacity” on dozens of occasions, and the west gate was shut down entirely for hours at a time. Traffic waiting to enter the park was backed-up for nearly two miles, clear through the community of West Glacier and onto State Highway 2. That killed business, as the roadway became a parking lot for the Park and “paying customers” couldn’t get to local businesses.
Public transit is another possible option to ease the number of private vehicles travelling on the Sun Road Corridor. With enough funding and infrastructure (new parking lots, energy-efficient vehicles, manpower, etc.) transit could take vehicles off the road, but would do little to address the core problem. Because private automobile traffic isn’t the real problem ... overcrowding is.

Make no mistake – business owners are in it to make a profit. But residents of northwestern Montana are united in their love for Glacier National Park. They feel a strong sense of ownership and stewardship, and believe that the Park is here to be protected, enjoyed and preserved, not exploited. The phrase you hear quite often in these parts is that we’re “loving the Park to death.”

The law of supply and demand doesn’t apply here. The demand is there ... but we can’t just go out and build more Glacier. As has always been the case, the National Park Service must balance the desires of the public to visit with the carrying capacity of the Park and the quality of the visitor experience.

In a situation like ours where the resource is limited but demand is insatiable, one strategy for managing visitor use is to actively promote recreational activities and attractions located outside the national park boundaries. GNP Superintendent Jeff Mow has been engaged with the local business community for several years in an effort to do exactly that, but is limited by departmental policies and restrictions.

Establishment of a full-service Visitor Information Center in West Glacier – outside the boundaries of the Park – would assist not only in educating visitors about the Glacier Experience and how to access it, but also about recreational opportunities, events and attractions in our gateway communities. The Province of Alberta has a multi-million dollar Visitor Center in West Glacier to try and lure tourists across the border; we should have something similar to help visitors more fully enjoy and experience the Glacier region, and take some pressure off the Park itself.

In closing, I would reiterate the opinion expressed by 90-percent of the business owners I’ve talked to in the last week ... that the Ticketed Entry Reservation System isn’t perfect. It needs some serious tweaking, and we need to look more strategically at how tickets are allocated and dispersed. But it’s a good first step toward dealing with a very difficult problem, and we urge the Park Service – and Glacier National Park, in particular – to stay the course.
Senator King. Thank you very much. I want to thank all of you for the important testimony and lots of ideas.

I want to ask Kevin Schneider, who's the superintendent at Acadia—Kevin, you went through a major transportation study that went on for several years. You worked with the community. Where did you end up on that? And have you enough experience with it now to know whether it is working?

Mr. Schneider. Yes, thank you, Chairman King. We spent several years preparing a transportation plan, which involved a great deal of community and stakeholder engagement. And you know, visitor use management at Acadia is not just about a vehicle reservation system. We're really trying to take a comprehensive approach by using a range of management actions, as outlined in that plan.

We worked closely with our communities, our business partners to help develop that plan. You know, many opportunities for public engagement—it was about a four- or five-year planning effort to do that. And there were, as I said, several components to this—expanding key park-and-ride locations in Acadia National Park so that visitors can leave their car behind, hop on our Island Explorer bus and get to key destinations; expanding the transit system to offer more routes for visitors and better bus service; using concessions contracts to move to smaller-sized commercial touring buses; and, of course, vehicle reservations are a piece of that as well. And so, we, as a result——

Senator King. You are doing the vehicle reservation at Cadillac Mountain this summer. Is it working? Do people know it when they get to the mountain or are they angry because they got there and didn't know they needed a reservation?

Mr. Schneider. Yes, we are very pleased with how the vehicle reservation system is going this summer on Cadillac. We did a pilot for about 21 days last fall, in October, and as a result of that pilot, we made a few tweaks. But in a nutshell, we're very pleased. I'll give you an example. I was on the summit of Cadillac on the first day of our reservations this year in May. I was there in uniform, kind of seeing how things were playing out. A visitor was there. He came up to me and he said that he had been there a week prior to watch the sunrise and he said it was a complete mess. There were cars everywhere. You know, completely overparked, cars double-parked. And he said, “This is so much better with the reservation system.” And we're hearing that sentiment from visitor reviews online. You can look at Tripadvisor. You can look at the Recreation.gov app and see what people are saying.

I think visitors understand that, you know, there are only 150 parking spaces on Cadillac Mountain and we want people to have a really high-quality experience and not everybody can be up there at the same time in their cars. It was not abnormal for us to have as many as 500 cars on the summit of Cadillac Mountain for those 150 parking spaces prior to the reservation system.

Senator King. Let me ask Mr. Reynolds a question. One of the issues, I understand, and I may be wrong about this, but the Park Service has a policy of not favoring one park over another, in terms of advertising and promotion. But can we think about that policy in terms of promoting the lesser-used national parks? For example,
I was in Southwest Texas at one point and almost, because of the weather, went to Big Bend and it turned out to be one of the best experiences that my family has had. It was a very little-visited national park. Can we do some promotion that will spread the visitation around somewhat so that they are not concentrated on a dozen iconic places?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, both for this hearing and conversation, but also for that question. We absolutely can be doing a much better job of letting the Americans know—I mentioned in my testimony, 423 sites. Many of them are gems—your words. And a lot of times they drive right by them on their way to a Glacier, to a Yellowstone.

We're interested in capturing folks once they're in a region of an area. If you go with your family, you're usually some place for three or four days and you'll have time and you can balance a suite of these kinds of things, like Kevin just mentioned is being done in Acadia. Well, while maybe you're waiting for an hour to get your ticket, you know, you might want to know that there is the Roosevelt site up on the Canadian border with Maine. And that's an affiliated area of the National Park System.

We have ways to use our new mobile app—Recreation.gov can help connect people to use and know about these places.

Senator King. Does that have a feature like Waze, the app that tells you where the congestion is?

Mr. Reynolds. No, it doesn’t.

Senator King. Could that be added?

Mr. Reynolds. I can't speak for that. We can come back to you and see what Recreation.gov, the folks that manage that for us, would be able to do. But I will tell you we're working in the field of emerging mobile technology—mobile integration, which I'm sure Senator Daines knows about, and this can range from tracking vehicles using Bluetooth without personal data to know what traffic is doing, much like what Waze, I think, uses background wise.

We have, as you know, bandwidth and infrastructure problems, particularly in the West, that can——

Senator King. We are working on that in another bill.

Mr. Reynolds [continuing]. It can challenge us. That’s another hearing. But yes, we have ways that we're working with—particularly our partners in the Federal Highway Administration right now with some innovative new technologies that will help us both manage and get the word out.

Senator King. Thank you. Senator Daines.

Senator Daines. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Gartland, thanks again for coming today. I want to explore Glacier Park’s ticketing system further with you. You made several comments about that in your testimony. You noted the ticketing system has its benefits as well as its drawbacks and the community believes there need to be some improvements. What are the top one or two improvements that you might suggest the Park Service might look at to help make that ticketing process better?

Mr. Gartland. Well, Senator, thank you for the question and thank you for the invitation to speak today.

Well, there are a lot of things that could be done to it. I expect that, when we close this summer up, that the park will take a close
look at that and determine how they want to move forward. I think really the biggest problem that we saw from an implementation standpoint was the late breaking of the decision to implement, really, less than 60 days before our peak summer season began. I know that there are reasons for that. We've all been living in a bizarro world for the last year and a half and there was lots of uncertainty about where we would be this summer.

But really, in talking with the folks here, we need to make a decision on what's going to happen next summer within the next couple of months if we're going to stay the course on this—and that really is the advice that my organization would give us, because we do think there are benefits to it.

We think the primary drawback and hassle this year has been that the decision was made late. Folks make reservations to visit Glacier National Park a year, two years in advance. When you make the reservations at hotels in the park and just adjacent to the park, they are available exactly one year from the day you go online. So folks are making those reservations a long time in advance. They're booking their flights a long time in advance. They had no chance to know that this was here, unless they went back and did some more planning. You're right. I'm a planner, so I would've known that the $2 ticket was there. But there are a lot of folks who walk in here and are completely surprised by it. So I think, number one, let's make the decision if we're going to continue with that early, no less than six months in advance, which would be December 1st, as six months before our peak season begins, Memorial Day-ish.

And the other one would be to have a bit more of a comprehensive marketing campaign to get the news about that out. That really was the lacking here, not just to folks like us who run visitor centers and deal with hundreds of people every day, planning their trips, but lodges, hotels, outfitters, all of those folks are de facto tourism counselors for Glacier National Park. We all get those tickets. When you walk into a restaurant and you don't know the area, you ask the waitress or the waiter, where would you go? And those things happen.

So really, from our perspective, it was a matter of timing—the late start, late decision to make the program work. And then, really, despite a lot of effort on behalf of the park staff, there was just a lot of uncertainty about how the system worked, what you needed to do to get a ticket, how come you were being spun off at 8 in the morning when you punched that button at 8:01, and just a lot of things—really, a lot of frustration getting to become comfortable with something new, Senator.

Senator Daines. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Gartland. Those sound like solvable problems, right? Sounds like, just put a stake in the ground quickly so that we can make better plans for next year. And then, I think, the second issue seemed even almost an educational issue to understand how the system works.

Just to press you for one more. Assuming we could solve those two problems—I think we can, just hearing from what you just told us—is there one other thing you might think about to change on that ticketing system? Any other thought come to mind?
Mr. GARTLAND. Yes, you know, the Chamber has two roles in life. One is improve business vitality and the other one is maintain quality of life. So from the quality-of-life standpoint of the folks that live here and work here and drive the economy—work in Glacier and support that economy—they need to have access to the park. I don’t know how that happens.

We had a discussion about that for about an hour yesterday on how do you make it available for folks who are—the reason they come here, Senator, to work for the summer, is so that they can enjoy the park. And if they’re leading raft trips down the Middle Fork and the Flathead, which is half in the park and half out of the park and they can’t get a pass to get into the park without going online at 8:00 in the morning when they’re working to compete with all the millions of folks that who are trying for those—we have to find a way to be able to accommodate them and we have to be able to find a way to accommodate those who are staying in park properties, whether they’re concessionaire-run or not, and can’t access the entire park.

If you go to Many Glacier Hotel and stay in Glacier National Park, you can’t access the Going-to-the-Sun Road without having an extra $2 ticket. If you’re at Lake McDonald, you can.

So I think there are a lot of issues regarding how we can prioritize. And I imagine there are legal issues about if we can prioritize who can have access to the park or not. But I think those are some of the tougher decisions that have to be dealt with.

Senator DAINES. Mr. Gartland, thank you. They are telling me I am out of time here. But Mr. Reynolds, we talked a little bit about the ticket entry system here and the questions I had. What’s your feedback been from local communities? Do you believe this has been an effective tool?

Mr. REYNOLDS. Yes.

Senator DAINES. You are looking at more of these parks that put in some kind of ticketed system. Thoughts?

Mr. REYNOLDS. Yes. Thank you, Senator. So, you know, apologies to Kevin and the team and the folks in Whitefish and around the park for some of the fits and starts on that. So I have definitely heard that, if that’s helpful, at the regional level, as well. I’ve also heard of late that it’s gotten smoother. And as I mentioned in testimony, we’re spreading things out and the experience is better.

We’re hearing from Estes Park and some other folks, anecdotally, that business is doing well with the system and that they’re also experimenting at Rocky. But, admittedly, I think what Mr. Gartland’s testimony and his really good points bring up is that we’ve got to work very closely with the business communities—with the communities. Almost a collaborative partnership needs to form so that we’re not doing this in a vacuum, and we will do that much more ahead.

The good news about our system is that no one size fits all. So what goes on at one park can be very different for a variety of reasons at another park. And we are trying to be extremely flexible and innovative in the way that these things go and not dictate to our parks how they form, which would let them be much more local in their development.
Senator Daines. Great, thanks, Mr. Reynolds. And Mr. Gartland, good news. Mr. Reynolds has heard you loud and clear here this morning. So this is all part of the process here of our hearing. So thank you, and thanks Mr. Reynolds.

Senator King. By the way, Senator Daines, you mentioned that in 1980, you graduated from high school. Are you old enough to be a U.S. Senator?

[Laughter.]

Senator King. I found that as shocking.

Senator Daines. Well, I want to hear those firsthand accounts of Lewis & Clark from you, there, Angus, whenever you have a chance.

[Laughter.]


Senator Hirono. I am stunned that—what? You graduated from where in 1980?

Senator King. From high school. Can you imagine?

Senator Hirono. It is too much information. I first ran for office in 1980.

Senator Daines. It was Student Body President, Bozeman High School for me.

[Laughter.]

Senator Hirono. Oh my gosh. Okay, well, you know it requires all of us to be here. So that is all I can say. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Reynolds, it is very clear that our parks, especially now, with COVID possibly receding, although in many places not so much, we have always had too many visitors and maybe not enough staff. Lots of tensions, lots of times when, I think, our employees have been under a lot of stress. Would you agree?

Mr. Reynolds. Thank you, Senator, for acknowledging that. The women and men of the National Park Service are my heroes. Particularly this last year they, much like all of us, all of you, dealt with very strange pressures on their lives, and we ask them to do a lot. The positive side of COVID, if there is one, is that they have been very, very innovative. They have started to rethink things at the front-line level. The downside is there is a lot of care and healing that we need to do, and support, to make sure our employees are staying mentally fit.

Senator Hirono. Yes, so that is where I am going. What are you doing to make sure that your employees’ mental health needs are being addressed? Do you have special counseling programs or things of that sort that you have set up?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, thanks for that question, Senator. So we’ve had, for years, things like the critical incident stress teams that will come in when an employee has, perhaps, been in a very difficult situation—an accident or a rescue. We’ve deployed those a lot more of late. We also—parks have unique relationships, sometimes, with a county health provider, sometimes with private providers or employee assistance programs, where you can quickly bring in a counselor or some other folks to work with groups.

I can give you a couple of personal examples from a fire that we managed in Yosemite, and we would bring the community together
a couple times a week with a counselor that came from the county. We did a cooperative agreement with them.

Senator Hirono. Do you have feedback from your employees that these kinds of efforts are helping them?

Mr. Reynolds. There is definitely positive feedback on many of the events. We can do a lot more, Senator, and we intend to do so.

Senator Hirono. Yes, I think you should.

Mr. Gartland, I am astounded. I have never visited Glacier National Park so I feel as though, my goodness, it would take me a long time to get there, to be able to get a ticket. I know that Mr. Reynolds said that it is not a “one size fits all”—that the community has to be, I assume, involved in the number of people who get into the parks and the accommodation for local people. So do you think enough is being done to make sure that the community around Glacier National Park and their concerns are being addressed, even as there is a—what did you say—a one-year wait for people to get into the park?

Mr. Gartland. Well, no, I said there’s a one-year reservation window.

Senator Hirono. Oh, reservation window, thank you.

Mr. Gartland. Yes. Senator, if you’d like to come out and see Glacier National Park, I’m sure we could find a way to get you in the gate, number one. I’ll give you my pitch that I have given a thousand times this summer. You can get into Glacier without a ticket before 6:00 in the morning, after 5:00 in the afternoon, or you can go to the east side and you can get into the Two Medicine area of the park or Many Glacier and enjoy the park without that $2 ticket.

But yes, I believe the park does a good job of interfacing with the community. Superintendent Mow sits on a group that meets monthly with us. He sits on many different groups that meet monthly in our community, but with the group of Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau and folks from the Forest Service and the BLM and all of our different agencies to talk about what’s happening, what’s being considered. So a lot of us in that group were privy to the fact that we were considering this type of a system. And he asked for our input and he actually staged meetings—Zoom meetings—with our business community, anybody who wanted to sit down and talk about this when the decision was finally made and as they were in the final stages of getting to that decision.

So I believe that they do a good job of seeking input from the communities around them and the public, and they are concerned about the impacts of the decisions they make in the park and what impact they have on folks outside the group.

Senator Hirono. So as in so many of our national parks, it is a situation where there are so many businesses very much dependent on the visitors. At the same time, there is such a thing as overload, so I am always interested to make sure that the local community has a voice in the decisions that are made with reference to what is happening in the national parks near them.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator King. Thank you, Senator. Senator Lee.

Senator Lee. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Mr. Reynolds, I would like to start with you. You serve as the Regional Director for the Park Service for Interior Regions 6, 7, and 8. And that, of course, puts you in charge of the parks within my state. Now, as I understand it, some problems with overcrowding occur and can be addressed inside of our parks, but many of these issues begin outside of our parks. Can you tell me a little bit about this consideration?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, Senator, thanks for that question. Getting people before they arrive would be one idea. And that's something that we are exploring some better—I guess you could say models and partnerships to look at traffic. We have a study happening in Grand Teton, outside of Utah, right now, but in our region, that's looking at where visitors are coming from, what they do when they get there, what their vehicles are doing, what their visitation preferences are.

These kinds of studies, through some social science work and working with the Federal Highway Administration, should be able to give us better data. But I think really getting the word out—Mr. Gartland mentioned, I think, something very similar, right? Before you leave the house, as it were, wherever you are, what is the situation on the ground? That's something that we're exploring.

Senator Lee. Right. So that people can decide when the best time might be for them to visit and which part of the park to enter, which part of the park to visit.

In 2020, Zion National Park, in my State of Utah, was the third most visited park in the nation, with around 3.6 million visitors. At times Zion has had to deal with some of these overcrowding issues because that is a lot of people visiting one park. In many cases a reservation has been suggested as the only solution in spite of strong opposition from most park visitors and local communities and that is something I strongly oppose.

But I think the East Zion Initiative can also serve as an excellent test case for what can be done to address these issues without capping visitors or degrading resources. Can you tell me a little bit about the efforts being undertaken to disperse visitors to underused assets as part of the East Zion Initiative?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, Senator. So we're pretty excited about the conversations happening in and around Zion, and I'm just going to use that as a general, regional area, if you will, sir, with the counties. But there's a multi-stakeholder engagement. There are interested citizens and developers that have the East Zion Initiative and others that could help to supplement what people will be able to do and stay and experience.

My understanding of the East Zion Initiative is we have some robust conversations starting again, so that we don't have just "one size fits all" for Zion. And you know, I've spoken to the East Zion folks, at least briefly, and they're extremely interested in working closely with us and the superintendent is as well.

Senator Lee. And those things have been very helpful and they are very appropriate for Zion. Zion consists of about 148,000 acres of land. But in years past, much of that visitation, as far as I can tell, the vast majority of it—overwhelming majority of it—has gravitated toward just a small handful of features in the park that are on, more or less, one side of the park. I have been very, very
pleased to see Superintendent Bradybaugh and other park leadership working to collaborate with local communities and trying to figure out how to preserve resources and facilitate greater access. How can we encourage this type of collaboration in all of our gateway communities?

Mr. REYNOLDS. Well, I think they are certainly—Superintendent Bradybaugh and his very good team are really innovative about how to handle those visitors without a lot of problems and are leading the way, along with the partners in that community, which had started long ago. They were one of the first shuttle systems, as you know, Senator.

And so, I think that we should be looking at the Zion conversations, the stakeholder meetings, as a model that we should try and strive for in other parks that we're dealing with, because I think having everyone at the table will avoid some of the problems we were just talking about a few minutes ago with Mr. Gartland.

Senator LEE. Some of these questions that you are addressing regarding dispersion and utilization of park assets, these are things that tend to require some fairly technical analysis.

Mr. REYNOLDS. Yes.

Senator LEE. What resources are currently available to our park superintendents to help make sure that our parks are accessible and well-maintained?

Mr. REYNOLDS. Yes, there's a range. I mean, the superintendent may say there's not enough yet, but we have a small social science program. These are folks that help us with study design and how to do things, you know, much more credibly, right, than just a back of the napkin kind of an approach.

So we have, first of all, some academic help. We have CESUs (Cooperative Education Study Units), and we have a number of them in Utah. And so, we can tap into academic help that way. We also have the Visitor Use Management Framework. We've trained a little over 300 of our employees throughout the service on that—about how to handle the various tools and mechanisms within a visitor use framework, and the Zion team is extremely up to speed on that.

Senator LEE. Thank you very much.

Senator KING. We will have a second round, and I want to start with Ms. Brengel. You mentioned in your testimony concerns about reservation systems and additional fees, in terms of impact on equity. We want everyone to be able to visit national parks. Could you expand on that concern and how we balance a reservation system, which seems to work in many cases, with the danger of excluding people from the park experience?

Ms. BRENGEL. Sure. I think when you hear about the visitation in many of the popular parks that do assess or have fee systems, that visitation is still growing. So fees are not a deterrent for people to come into parks. But what we did find, in terms of reservation systems, was in Yosemite last year when, due to COVID, they put a reservation system in place, was that some of the day visitors who were Latino struggled with the English-only information about getting into the parks and weren't aware of the reservation system. And so, communicating with folks about the reservation systems is sort of a key piece—and the fee system.
But our concern is the families who are coming in who are low income, whether it is a deterrent for them to come into a park and buy an America the Beautiful pass, or a day pass, or a week pass, because of the fees. And I just don’t think it’s been thoroughly studied within the park system what is deterring certain low-income visitors from parks.

And so, I think, as Mike was just talking about, the social science, they’re small teams. We need to add to the social science teams and make sure that we’re taking a look and actually surveying people as to what is deterring them from coming into parks, and if fees are playing a role in it.

Senator King. Thank you. I think the result of what you are saying is that more study is necessary to examine unintended consequences.

Ms. Brengel. Yes.

Senator King. Particularly with regard to equity.

Mr. Reynolds, I’m very interested in the technological aspects of this. One possibility—we talked about adding to the program a kind of Waze component, where you could immediately check and see what the congestion situation is. Another piece would be to have a—I have an app on my phone called “AroundMe” that, if I type in “restaurant”, it will show me all the restaurants within a few miles. The same thing could be done in terms of natural resources.

The example I give, my family and I were in Moab and we were between Arches and Canyonlands. We went to a diner and the wait staff said, “Oh, you’ve got to go to Dead Horse Point State Park”, which is adjacent. And we wouldn’t have—except for that coincidence, we wouldn’t have known about it. So I also think about, as an antidote to this congestion problem, making people aware of other cultural, historic, and scenic assets in the area, through your Recreation.gov app or a different national park app.

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, so I agree, Senator. I think any of these—embracing technology is a really important part of our communications and engagement framework. I mentioned earlier——

Senator King. And by the way, it would be nice if it were in multiple languages. Right, Ms. Brengel?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes. That will be a challenge. But we fully embrace this need for equity and inclusion, you know, with our diverse visitors that are now coming—the face of America.

We also—the NPS mobile app, this new app that I’ve mentioned—I hope you have one on your phone, Senator. It’s fun to use. But it’s going to integrate across the platforms that we do have now, like Recreation.gov. And it has, I think, the seeds for much of what you’re asking us about. But we would love to sit down with who you would suggest, or your staff, to talk through more about what we can do to expand on this idea.

Senator King. You mentioned—I think it was you that mentioned timed-entry pilots.

Mr. Reynolds. Yes.

Senator King. My question is, what results are you seeing? In other words, I assume what that means is you can go to Going-to-the-Sun Road at 10:00 a.m. or at 3:00 p.m. You schedule a time ahead. Is that what you are referring to?
Mr. REYNOLDS. Not quite, Senator—more what the pilots are, before we've made final decisions, and Glacier would be the perfect example of that. The Going-to-the-Sun Road program right now is a pilot. So I'm trying to say this in a sense of good news for those that are critical of it right now, because we're learning as we go. We are trying to respond to what looked, and has become, a very, very busy summer with, you know, more limited staff. And so, the pilot did help us to manage, but we're also learning daily how best to tweak things. Rocky Mountain is in a second summer of piloting, and Superintendent Sidles there has adjusted a lot of things based on what they've learned over time.

So one thing we have learned is that the hour of the day could be adjusted, to perhaps allow more folks that are local, as Mr. Gartland was speaking of, to be able to get into the park at a more reasonable hour, because they learned that maybe the visitation patterns weren't as full as they thought in certain parking lots. Or likewise, they learned that perhaps in that park, there's a certain road corridor that's extremely popular. You can probably imagine. And so they have focused an effort around that area, and then that lets people be a little more free in the rest of the park.

So those are the kinds of lessons that we learn through these pilots. And then we're able to tweak before we've made something official, right, and government planned.

Senator KING. Superintendent Schneider, I take it you are finding that the new system at Cadillac is, in fact, working with a minimum of irritation or resistance. Is that accurate?

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Yes, it's working very well. We printed over 200,000 of these cards to help get the word out about the system, which is really, really important. We want visitors to know about it when they show up. We don't want visitors showing up and saying, “What do you mean I need a reservation?” And we distributed those to our lodging partners, to welcome centers throughout the State of Maine, all the visitor centers, local chambers of commerce, and so on.

When you make a lodging reservation around here, many of the hotels will send you an email saying, “Don't forget to make your Acadia reservations and here's how to do it”, with the link to the Recreation.gov website.

Seventy percent of our reservations go on sale 48 hours out. So for example, if you want a reservation to go to Cadillac tomorrow, you can go online right now, and reservations are available. Sunrise is already sold out. Sunrise sells out in literally a minute or seconds. But there are ample reservations typically available on a regular basis.

Senator KING. By the way, Eastport, Maine says they get the first sun of the year, but I won't get into that dispute. Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Senator Kelly is here.

Senator KING. Oh, I am sorry, Senator Kelly.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Reynolds, I understand that you oversee the National Park Service region that includes Arizona. As you probably know, we have a visitor access issue at Lake Powell in Glen Canyon National
Park. And Mr. Chairman, I have a letter from Mayor Diak, of the City of Page, Arizona, that I ask to be added to the record.

Senator KING. Without objection.

[Letter from Mayor Diak follows:]
07/25/2021

The Honorable Doug Ducey
Governor of the State of Arizona
1700 West Washington Street
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Dear Governor Ducey,

I am writing this letter to bring to your attention a potential economic crisis that the City of Page is facing. As you are aware, the water levels at Lake Powell are at a historic low. Because of the low water levels National Park Service has made the decision to close all boat ramps in Page. This decision, on top of last year’s COVID-19 pandemic could be the end to many of our small businesses. It is because of this that I am asking you to declare an Economic State of Emergency. I am hoping that this request will show to you the severity for the business owners in our community.

We at the City of Page have made every effort to communicate our concerns to the National Park Service concerning such a drastic move as to closing the boat ramps. The City of Page sees nearly 5 million visitors a year, a good portion of those visitors are coming to recreate on Lake Powell. This closure, I am afraid, could be the final nail in the coffin of our small businesses.

I want to thank you in advance for your willingness to work with the City of Page. It is my hope that you will see the critical importance of the closing our local boat ramps and help us in getting them reopened.

Best regards,

William Diak, Mayor

CC:
Senator Mark Kelly c/o Coral Evans
Senator Kyrsten Sinema c/o Ben Stewart
Representative Tom O’Halleran c/o Keith Brekus
Michael T Reynolds, NPS Regional Director, DOI Regions 6, 7 & 8
Billy Shott, Superintendent, NPS
Debbie Johnson, Director, AOT
Senator Kelly. The mayor’s letter talks about the closure of boat ramps at Lake Powell due to declining water levels, and he reports that visitors cannot launch any boats from South Lake Powell. Mr. Reynolds, drought conditions in the West have caused the nation to lose access to one of the largest reservoirs in the nation. If this continues unmitigated, it could crush the economy of Page, Arizona and, you know, this is certainly an engineering issue. I mean, if the ramp doesn’t reach the water, the ramp is unusable. I get that. But what is the Park Service doing to rehabilitate, or extend the ramps at South Lake Powell?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, thank you, Senator. And we are aware of the mayor’s letter, so thank you for having that in the record. And our superintendent, Billy Shott, down there is working closely with the mayor and I understand your staff, as well, for these solutions.

The drought situation on the Colorado River is a huge crisis. We are investing and moving—I guess you could say this is an artful term—but moving money around to try and prioritize for the superintendent and that team there. I think they call them pipe and gravel, rather than a formal, paved apron for boat ramp, to try and get some things in.

Ironically, there are some old boat ramps that were buried—you know, were under the water, right? They were built there in the 1960’s as the water was rising. We used them and then they went underwater. They’re now coming open again and there may be some opportunities that they’re looking at, as we speak, in the last 48 hours, to see if we can put some funding in there to reutilize those sites. There are a lot of complexities, as you could imagine, but we would be happy to sit down with your team and talk through all the details of what we’re working on. But we are prioritizing some funding to help the park to respond to this so that we can maintain some temporary or secondary boat ramps, as it were. There are really only two open right now out of the eleven that we normally have.

Senator Kelly. Would that funding come from the $1.6 billion from the Great American Outdoors Act? Is that where that funding would come from?

Mr. Reynolds. I'll let the team follow up with your staff to detail exactly that, but my best thought is no. It would usually come from some emergency funding that we have because there are very specific—as you know well—very specific requirements around the GAOA money.

Senator Kelly. And I understand we will be discharging some water from Lake Powell to Lake Mead here, imminently?

Mr. Reynolds. Yes.

Senator Kelly. What is the anticipated decrease in the level of Lake Powell from that?

Mr. Reynolds. I’ll have to get back to you on that exact number, but the Bureau of Reclamation is really the one in charge of that water flow, and they have been letting us know that they’re sending water on down through the chain through some of the other states that we also see. I think that it’s just basically to keep stabilizing things as long as we can. But we’ll get you those numbers, Senator.

Senator Kelly. Well, thank you, Mr. Reynolds.
Ms. Brengel, good morning and thanks for joining us today. This summer, we are glad to see that visitation at Grand Canyon National Park appears to be returning to pre-pandemic levels. Fortunately, the park has not needed to adopt any form of reservation system like other parks have for day visits, but there is still a need to expand Grand Canyon’s bus and shuttle system to address the two-hour wait times that occasionally happen when people are trying to get to the South Rim.

In your testimony, you suggest using more buses to transport visitors to national parks. Could the National Park Service be doing more to promote park-and-ride services in communities that neighbor national parks, such as Tusayan, Arizona?

Ms. Brengel. Yes, and I think one example could be Yosemite, where the shuttles can start outside of the park and come in. And you know, there are a couple of other examples of that, and I think Kevin talked about the Island Explorer at Acadia, as well. The issue is, sometimes you’re still increasing the volume into a park. And so, you really need to look at how many people you’re still bringing in via shuttle, and how you’re circulating them around the park. And that’s where the social science that we’ve been talking about is going to become really important is—where are the shuttles taking folks and are we distributing the visitation throughout the park?

But this is where we need your help, too, is we have an infrastructure bill being crafted right now and we’ve been able to benefit. The Park Service has been able to benefit from money in the surface transportation bill to purchase shuttles. And so we really just need to make sure that we’re looking at the surface transportation bill and the infrastructure proposal and adding in funds for transit for parks, or for transit for outside communities to use to bring people into parks.

But it’s a great system. I think it works in a lot of parks. I think we need to explore that in the parks that are getting serious overcrowding. But I would just say, in Grand Canyon, where people get dropped off, and making sure that we’re distributing folks around the park is going to be important.

Senator KELLY. Well, thank you, Ms. Brengel, and I look forward to working with your office on solving some of these issues. Thank you.

Senator KING. Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Chairman, thank you. One of my priorities in this Committee has been to find ways to encourage visitation to some of our lesser-known parks. This would relieve some pressure on the big parks, while boosting visitation at these—as has been referred to today—hidden gems.

My question, Mr. Reynolds, is if you could provide some additional thoughts on what the Park Service is doing to provide an increased visibility of some of these lesser visited parks.

Mr. REYNOLDS. Yes. First off, on a broader scale, Senator, trying to really highlight them in some of the public newsletters that might go out to different web publications or, you know, personal apps that just say “Hey, have you ever heard of this place?” And this is what it does. So we start some campaigns working with our communications office here in Washington, as well, to make sure
these lesser-known parks—which are also stories, right? American stories are told.

The other thing we ask our superintendents in these parks with the lower visitation numbers is to be very aggressive, if you will, with their education and outreach to particularly work with the local communities around them or the regional tourism boards to help them highlight their sites. And then we’re encouraging more and more special events or certain educational programs that would be—I guess you could call them the niche opportunities to see things. So Grant-Kohrs Ranch, in your good state, Senator, could be really highlighting the life and art of the cowboy of the West, right, and that may attract a certain number of people that didn’t even realize a working ranch is part of the National Park System.

Senator Daines. It seems like visitors are always intrigued by how to get off the beaten path.

Mr. Reynolds. Yes.

Senator Daines. And find those areas that are maybe a little less discovered, relatively speaking. I think the Chairman mentioned his example where there was a recommendation like, “You are here but have you thought about this other location?” I guarantee, if we were to do a car-to-car survey of those who are waiting in line at either Glacier Park or Yellowstone National Park, and say, “Have you ever heard of Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site?”

Mr. Reynolds. Right.

Senator Daines. I am guessing the awareness of that park would be in the single digits at best.

Mr. Reynolds. Well, Senator, we often say in this visitor use planning, we use indicators and standards. So we’ll use Grant-Kohrs Ranch, you and I, as an indicator, to see how we’re doing the next year.

Senator Daines. Alright. Yes, well, that would be a way to see what kind of name ID they have there.

Back on the issue of innovation, and Chairman, a little of this has been talked about already. You know, the private sector has been using technology innovation to solve the challenge we are talking about here today for a long time. Whether it is a theme park, hotels, campgrounds, highways, it has successfully used new and innovative ways to drive visitors to specific places at specific times, even with traffic and just, like, a Waze app.

What can the Park Service do to better tap into that success? Because I think we do not have to really reinvent too much here. I think there is some reapplication that can be done that would do it more cost effectively and have a better outcome to address some of these concerns we are talking about today, by the use of technology.

Mr. Reynolds. Yes. I do think this is one of our challenges. There are funding challenges, there’s logistics, there’s—you know, we’re park people, not necessarily programmers, right? But we have a lot of friends, allies, and stakeholders that can help us in this, Senator. And I think that’s what we need to do is to be pushing ourselves to find ways, you know, and all the legal mechanisms and agreements to work with those that are already doing these things and see if they can tag onto our existing infrastructure.
Senator Daines. Yes, I think that some of these public-private partnerships like “Find Your Park” have been successful in helping drive visitation to new parks. I think there are a lot of folks who want to help us solve this problem——

Mr. Reynolds. Yes.

Senator Daines [continuing]. To improve the user experience and to help the businesses that surround, and are part of, these gateway communities, as well.

Mr. Reynolds. Yes, and, you know, there will be places in the National Park System that have the bandwidth and some of the infrastructure. I'm not trying to make excuses, but just trying to start where we've got——

Senator Daines. Sure.

Mr. Reynolds [continuing]. That ability. As you know, working with Superintendent Sholly, he's working on some mechanisms with the private sector to help fund it, basically, to put in some more broadband infrastructure. You can be in Yellowstone—I think some people are very grateful for this—and be completely offline, but there are some applications for it, to your point.

Senator Daines. Yes. I think probably, as Mr. Gartland would attest, we do not want people going home from an experience with a negative kind of rating because of the lack of access or lack of planning and having a poor experience. I think it is beneficial to get repeat visitation. We want people to go back home and tell their ten friends and neighbors here about what a wonderful experience they had with our parks.

Mr. Reynolds. I know a number of professionals in the National Park Service that would love to sit down with anyone you might suggest, Senator, to talk about that.

Senator Daines. Okay, thank you. Mr. Chairman.

Senator King. Well, I appreciate the witnesses' testimony today. I want to refer to a line in Mr. Gartland's testimony, which jumped out at me. He said, “The law of supply and demand doesn’t apply here. The demand is there but we can’t just go out and build more Glacier Parks.” Well, perhaps we need to bear that in mind as this Committee and Subcommittee consider new proposals for parks, that across the country there is a demand, and it is increasing.

All the ideas we have talked about today—spreading the visitation out, reservation systems in certain situations, shuttle buses, and other situations—as we have all learned, there is no single solution. But one additional solution is to provide additional opportunities for people to enjoy these extraordinary places in our country.

Again, I want to thank all of our witnesses for your testimony today. I want to be clear that we will have a period in which the Committee may submit additional questions in writing. If so, we would ask those members to submit those for the record by 6:00 p.m. tomorrow. We will keep the record open, and we will keep the hearing record open for two weeks to receive additional comments. And as those of you who have participated in our hearing today reflect upon our experience and if you have additional thoughts, please supply them to the Committee.

As I said in the beginning, we are not starting this hearing with predetermined legislation. We are starting this hearing with a pre-
determined problem that we want to address on behalf of the American people.
So thank you again to our witnesses, to my vice-chair, and this meeting is adjourned.
[Whereupon, at 11:18 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]
APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks
July 28, 2021 Hearing: The Impacts of Overcrowding in Our National Parks on Park Resources and Visitor Experiences, and to Consider Strategic Approaches to Visitor Use Management
Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Michael T. Reynolds

Questions from Committee Ranking Member Barrasso

Question 1: How can initiatives like the Greater Zion Initiative in Utah be replicated at other NPS units?

Response: The National Park Service (NPS) is committed to engaging local, regional and national communities, partners, and other stakeholders as the NPS addresses the complex issues of crowding and congestion. Several NPS units are currently coordinating with a variety of partners such as the Federal Transit Administration, State Departments of Transportation, State Offices of Tourism, and friends groups to develop projects that promote region-wide tourism opportunities to better accommodate visitors while addressing congestion issues. The NPS is engaging in multiple integrated transportation initiatives and collaborating with partners to meet shared needs and to develop opportunities to improve access to public lands. Similar to the Greater Zion Initiative, these efforts help coordinate and promote state and local tourism information about regional tourism opportunities to help spread visitation and ease congestion.

Question 2: What can be done to ensure local citizens in gateway communities can have access to parks that are using reservation systems?

Response: The NPS wants every visitor, including those who live in the surrounding community, to have a great park experience. The agency recognizes that every person’s relationship with their national parks is unique and special. For local and regional residents of any national park, this often translates to an immense amount of pride in and advocacy for the national parks that they frequently visit. In park units that are highly congested, visitors often experience long lines to get in to the park, may be faced with excessive traffic within the park, may be unable to find parking, and can experience overcrowded trails. A timed entry permit reservation system can benefit all visitors, including local residents, as it can provide visitors with more certainty and an overall better experience.
Questions from Ranking Member Daines

**Question 1:** It is my understanding that the hiring process at the Park Service can take months and that it is hard for parks to quickly adapt and hire employees to address increased visitation or other problems that come up. It is also my understanding that the Park Service is currently utilizing emergency hiring authority but that program will soon end, leaving our parks in a position where they have to wait months to hire qualified staff. How can the Administration and Congress work together to speed up the hiring process?

**Response:** The NPS has taken multiple steps to address lagging hiring timelines. For instance, the NPS has standardized frequently used position descriptions across the NPS, which has resulted in the posting of open continuous vacancies and the establishing of standing registers from which multiple selections may be made at once. These new protocols have allowed the NPS to be able to submit multiple hires in record time, with over 6,000 vacancies filled in the third quarter of fiscal year 2021 alone.

**Question 2:** Employee retention, employee housing, and funding for new staff also contributes to staff shortages. What do you think needs to be done to ensure the Park Service can continue to hire and retain the best talent?

**Response:** NPS employees are expected to live in private market housing unless they perform duties that make living in the park required or when affordable housing in the community is unaffordable or unavailable. Recently, the housing market in many gateway communities has made housing unavailable or unaffordable for NPS employees, leading to challenges with recruitment. The NPS is exploring alternative ways to create additional housing.

The NPS has published new policies regulating the granting of, among others, Recruitment, Retention and Relocation Incentives (RRI) and Superior Qualifications to attract top talent and retain employees. The NPS has granted incentives for permanent staff and continues to make retention incentives part of its hiring protocols for Federal Employees as needed. It is important to note, however, that 46.1% of the attrition within the NPS over the last 3 years has come from retirements. A third of the NPS workforce is eligible to retire within the next five years.

**Question 3:** Please provide for the Subcommittee an analysis of the visitation numbers at the current top 20 most visited park units since 1980 compared to the employment levels each year at the same park units.

**Response:** The NPS employment numbers date from 2012 when universal reporting codes were fully implemented.
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**Question 4:** It was noted during the hearing that from 2011-2019, staff capacity decreased by 16%. Is that number accurate and what factors account for this decrease?

**Response:** Yes, between FY 11 and FY 19, the total number of NPS full time employees decreased by approximately 3,500 or 16%. This drop can be attributed to factors such as rising fixed costs of employee salary and benefits, loss of purchasing power because of inflation, and an increase in new units. For example, an average GSI-09 interpretation ranger's average salary and benefits cost in 2011 was 3
approximately $63,000, versus $77,000 in 2021. Additionally, during this period the National Park System has grown to include new units, and existing units have seen responsibilities grow through increasing lands and infrastructure and unprecedented visitation.

**Question 5:** It was discussed in the hearing that the Park Service currently has a number of pilot programs dealing with park visitation. This includes ticketed entry, how to integrate technology into services, and how to spread park traffic, among other things. Can you provide a list of pilot programs currently happening at park units that look to address visitation and crowding?

**Response:** There are several pilot programs the NPS is employing to come up with ways to address visitation and crowding.

**Timed Entry** - There are currently several National Park units using a timed-entry system. In some cases, this system helps manage visitation through timed access to the entire park, in other cases, the system applies only to certain locations or attractions within the park that may experience congestion. In the summer and fall of 2020, four park units (Rocky Mountain National Park, Zion National Park, Yosemite National Park, and Dinosaur National Monument) implemented temporary managed access systems and one park unit (Acadia National Park) implemented a managed access pilot. In summer 2021, the pilots at Rocky Mountain and Yosemite were still in place, and Glacier National Park started a pilot. In 2021, Acadia transitioned to a permanent timed-entry reservation system for Cadillac Summit. Other similar permanent systems are in place at Muir Woods and Haleakalā National Park.

- **Acadia National Park** — currently operating a timed entry at Cadillac Mountain to control congestion during peak times throughout the day, particularly at Daytime, Sunrise, Sunset. Tickets are released 90 days in advance and then 2 days in advance of the start date.
- **Glacier National Park** – is using a day-use ticketed entry system to manage access on the popular Going-to-the-Sun Road. Tickets are valid 7 days and are only valid and required from the hours of 6 am to 5 pm Mountain Time. Tickets can be purchased either 60 days in advance, or 2 days in advance of the start date. Visitors can enter the park before and after the time entry period without a ticket.
- **Yosemite National Park** – currently using a day-use ticketed entry system that allows visitors to enter Yosemite Valley. The tickets are valid for entry for three consecutive days. Tickets are required to enter Yosemite at any point throughout the day.
  - Day-use reservations are released April 21 for arrivals May 21 through June 30. After that release, entire months’ worth of tickets are released in one-week intervals. Additional tickets are released on a rolling basis seven days in advance of arrival.
- **Rocky Mountain National Park** – currently using timed entry for different sections of the park. Visitors can enter the park before and after the timed entry period without a ticket. Tickets are released 90 days in advance and then 1 day in advance of the start date.
- **Great Smoky Mountains National Park** — conducted a pilot program for the month of September in 2021.
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NPS Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) - ATS connect communities to parks and help manage congestion. Over the past 10 years, the NPS has piloted several ATS in parks such as Joshua Tree, Delaware Water Gap, and Sequoia Kings Canyon. These programs make use of multiple use paths, bike share, and other transportation services into the park from the surrounding communities either year-round or during peak visitation. The NPS is also beginning to consider transit pilots at several other parks.

NPS Congestion Management Program - This program provides support to improve how NPS units manage congestion issues such as entrance station lines, crowding parking areas, and traffic circulation. The program offers a toolkit that features 59 tools and a process to identify congestion problems and mitigate them. Assessments are also available to provide short-term technical support to quickly assist parks with moderate levels of congestion. Parks across the service have implemented congestion mitigation strategies such as parking attendants at Yellowstone’s Midway Geyser Basin, active metering of vehicles at the entrance station at Arches, variable message boards to manage large vehicle access at Montezuma Castle, and car free days at Great Smokies’ Cades Cove.

Digital Payments (Activity passes, Scan & Pay) - Activity passes allow visitors to purchase passes for specific activities at a location, reducing the need for in-person transactions and often increasing compliance for securing a pass in advance of a visit. The Scan & Pay feature offers visitors the ability to secure and pay for a first-come, first-served campsite once they arrive to their destination, thus eliminating on-site cash payments through a kiosk or attendant.

Lotteries (permits, tickets, camping) – For locations and activities that offer recreation opportunities that are in extremely high demand for limited visitors, lotteries offer a fair and equitable method for awarding permits, tickets or even campsites.

NPS Widget – Recreation.gov worked with the National Park Service to integrate a widget onto NPS.gov pages that allows visitors to reserve campsites while remaining within the NPS.gov site. The widget employs the Recreation.gov reservation workflow, such that transactions are secure, and visitors receive confirmation and updates about their reservations from the Recreation.gov system.

Recommendation Engine – This search engine provides users with alternative locations and sites when their desired selections are already reserved.

Availability Bot at the Call Center – This call center bot gives people availability quickly over the phone without having to wait for an agent.

Question 6: What current efforts or programs are ongoing at the Park Service related to increasing visibility and visitation to smaller or less visited park units?

Response: A number of initiatives have been implemented to help park visitors thoughtfully plan their visits to NPS units based on their desired experiences and activities, including sharing information via park websites, Rec.gov, and the NPS App, on the specific opportunities at each unit, along with
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recreational and educational opportunities available at nearby public lands. Further, the agency is working on ways to communicate about sites that may be not as well-known, through campaigns such as Find Your Park, Every Kid in a Park, and the National Scenic Byways Program.

The NPS is also developing new tourism strategy tools that can help staff conduct research, better understand the interests and motivations of potential visitor segments, offer innovative visitor experiences, and work with partners to raise awareness among targeted audiences. Additionally, the agency works with the tourism and recreation industries in a variety of ways to coordinate messaging and promotion, and to highlight less-visited sites.

The NPS has a large presence on social media that includes hundreds of park-specific accounts as well as the agency’s “parent” accounts. Park staff continuously use these platforms to cross-promote and share content so that parks with a smaller audience of followers (and that may be less-visited) get exposure to a larger audience that is actively interested in parks. The agency also leverages public relations and media coverage to promote lesser-visited sites, generating a large volume of media coverage that can influence trip-planning and decision-making. We also work continuously with a variety of partners such as the National Park Foundation, cooperating associations, friends’ groups, and community partners to amplify information about lesser-visited sites.

Question 7: We heard that reservations can be made 48 hours in advance in some locations that require ticketed entry, but these reservations often sell out in seconds. How does this impact people who cannot obtain a reservation, especially if their visit was centered on going to a National Park?

Response: For most private vehicle reservation systems, the permits are broken up into two batches. The first batch is available well in advance of the visit (usually multiple months) for those visitors who prefer to get their reservations as part of their larger trip planning along with hotel and other travel reservations. A second batch of permits is then made available for short-term purchase (week of, 48 hours in advance, or day of depending on the park). Leftover advance reservations and returned reservations are typically added to the short-term reservation pool.

In addition, enhancements to Rec.gov will also provide added recommendation and map features to provide reasonable alternatives to visitors. For example, the website and app will provide suggestions for other federal lands that do have availability within a reasonable driving distance.

While permits for the highest demand locations and times do tend to go quickly, in almost all units, these proactive systems allow the parks to accommodate more visitors safely and sustainably than they could otherwise accommodate with other types of strategies (e.g., gate closures, social media messages).
Question 8: How do ticketing systems impact revenue at the specific park and in surrounding gateway communities?

Response: At this time, it is difficult to pinpoint the specific revenue impact from a ticketing system. Many issues, including surges in visitation due to Covid-19 and impacts from natural disasters such as fires and storms, contribute to an impact on revenue at various park areas.
Questions from Senator Murkowski

Question 1: Brooks Camp in Katmai National Park attracts thousands of visitors each year to view brown bears catching salmon along the Brooks River. Katmai visitation has increased over the years, resulting in overcrowding to the point that the park is considering building new viewing platforms up at the falls. Visitors are limited the amount of time they are able to view on the platform due to overcrowding. How does NPS plan to address overcrowding in remote parks such as in Katmai, where visitation has complex logistics—such as arrival by floatplane? Given the sheer size of Katmai, does it make more sense to encourage visitation elsewhere in the park, rather than funneling thousands of people to one trail and viewing platform?

Response: In the Alaska Region, the NPS understands that the need for visitor use management regarding bears is increasing. The Katmai National Park’s strategy for accommodating continued growth involves opportunities beyond the Brooks Camp area and includes working with surrounding communities to develop other visitor opportunities. Katmai National Park recently completed a “pre-NEPA” analysis of issues associated with increased visitation, including a financial and economic market analysis of bear viewing along the coast.

Question 2: The use of private vehicle access on Denali Park Road through the road lottery is gaining in popularity. In addition, private guiding companies are competing for limited permits to bring visitors into the Park, in lieu of the bus concessions. How do we address equity between the bus, private vehicle access through the road lottery, and private guiding businesses wishing to conduct tours along the Denali National Park Road?

Response: Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali) has provided trips on the 92-mile Park Road via a bus system since 1972. The bus system allows for more visitors (52 per vehicle), an interpretive experience from a knowledgeable driver, and a safe way to travel the narrow gravel road. The 2012 Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan used adaptive management principles to maximize the number of visitors who could experience the Denali Park Road while minimizing the known negative effects of traffic on wildlife and resources.

During the pandemic season of 2020, Denali faced a summer of few out-of-state travelers and increased in-state interest in visiting the park. To accommodate this unusual visitation, Denali opened the road to private guiding companies taking vehicle tours into the park. Five companies applied for permission, but only four operated. In 2021, more normal operations resumed (estimating 45% of a "normal" year), and the bus system was once again able to meet demand.

Denali’s Fall Road Lottery, an event where private vehicles can drive the park road after the bus system stops running in September, has remained consistently popular.

Recent park planning efforts have addressed growing visitation in the shoulder seasons (March-May) and the increase in winter visitors. The 2020 Winter and Shoulder Season Plan considered the difference in
visitor needs and expectations during the spring and early summer season which is favored by Alaskans and independent travelers. It also approved new business offerings for guided tours during the winter and spring season. Independent visitors can access the first 15 miles of the Park Road throughout the year and the first 30 miles, when passable, until mid-May.

NPS’s decisions regarding summer vehicles in Denali are guided by public input and planning documents in the Park’s Vehicle Management Plan. The plan undergoes a periodic review and update of its standards, and alternatives to the current mix of bus, private vehicle via lottery, and private guides can be evaluated at that time.
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Question: The Great American Outdoors Act provides the National Park Service with just over $1.3 billion annually for 5 years to address its deferred maintenance backlog. Along with several members on this subcommittee, I cosponsored and helped pass the Restore Our Parks Act out of the Energy & Natural Resources Committee in both the 115th Congress and 116th Congress and was pleased to see it signed into law last year. How important it is to have a dedicated, stable source of funding to address maintenance needs at our national parks?

Response: The passage of this legislation has created an extraordinary opportunity for crucial investments in our nation's most meaningful landscapes. The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funding provides the much-needed funding to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities that will enhance the visitor experience, protect resources now and in the future, and help ensure increased access for all visitors. Many of the roads, trails, restrooms, water treatment systems, waste-water systems, and visitor facilities in national park units are aging and strained by a level of use they were not designed to support. In addition to the crucial GAOA funding for deferred park maintenance, NPS will need to continue to rely on its traditional funding sources to address scheduled maintenance, repairs, and long-term rehabilitation and/or replacement needs.
Questions from Chairman King

Question 1: As we discuss ways to address overcrowding and traffic congestion in national parks, using technology to ensure that visitors have the latest, most up-to-the-minute information available could play a key role in helping alleviate crowding and ensuring that visitors have a better experience. For example, if a visitor knows that the crowds at Thunder Hole is Acadia are high, they can readjust their plans and instead head up Cadillac for an afternoon hike.

How is the National Park Service utilizing technology—including existing platforms such as the NPS app and recreation.gov, as well as emerging opportunities—to relay up-to-date crowd information to visitors? What ways do you envision being able to use these technologies to help make access to crowd information more readily available to visitors? Do you need additional support from Congress—either through new authorities or additional funding—to be able to implement the use of these new technologies?

Response: Comprehensive, reliable, and accessible traveler information plays an important role in enhancing recreational access to parks. Visitor satisfaction is strongly tied to expectations and disseminating traveler information in advance sets the stage for a satisfying visit. When the NPS designs visitor travel information (trip planning, wayfinding, and congestion info), our goal is to ensure that visitors have the right information at the right time to make an informed decision.

The NPS’s Emerging Mobility and Digital/Web Services workgroups collaborate to integrate traveler information into the NPS app, website, and other outlets. Additionally, the NPS is identifying opportunities to pilot the inclusion of real time or predictive transportation condition information into NPS’s digital products when it will influence visitor decision making. Additional research and development are needed so that the most efficient and effective tools are identified for determining funding, staffing, and data gaps needed to support the products. For “real time” and predictive traveler information to successfully be integrated into digital products, NPS staff will be needed to manage the supporting transportation data systems.

Question 2: The Park Service does a good job collecting data on visitation throughout the system. However, when we went looking for visitation on the Appalachian Trail, another park unit in Maine, we only had estimates on visitation from partners. The Park Service doesn’t measure visitation on the Appalachian Trail—or any of the ten other National Scenic Trails. I understand that tracking visitation on a linear park is much more difficult.

Is this something that the Park Service has examined? What resources would you need to better collect visitation data on our scenic trails?

Response: The NPS is one of the three agencies (including the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management) that has federal national trail administration responsibilities for the congressionally designated 11 national scenic trail and 19 national historic trail components of the National Trails System
spanning approximately 55,000 miles. The system is cooperatively managed by nonfederal and other federal partners who collaborate in the management of a complex network of trails, waterways, roads, and byways. These linear, collaboratively managed corridors often exceed thousands of miles, span multiple States, and pass through an array of land management entities and jurisdictions. This, combined with innumerable access and egress points, adds an overwhelming complexity to collecting and measuring valid and reliable visitation data for an entire trail or major segments of trails. Agencies and partners have been successful at counting trail use at a few discrete local locations or facilities that are frequently or heavily used. However, tracking and quantifying visitor use information over these large multijurisdictional landscapes is an extremely difficult challenge. Applying traditional visitor survey methods used in smaller areas with limited access points, like parks, would be cost-prohibitive and ineffective.

Some past exploratory studies have been performed by the NPS or through others along some of the more heavily used areas of individual national trails. In addition, the NPS, in coordination with other national trail administering agencies, has been exploring options to evaluate methods, including consideration of emerging data collection sources and technologies, and to identify the resources needed to accurately quantify visitation levels.
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Questions from Senator Kelly

**Question 1:** What is the National Park Service doing to rehabilitate or extend the boat ramps at southern Lake Powell in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area?

**Response:** The NPS FY 2022 budget request includes a $17 million increase for Emergency and Unscheduled Projects funding, as one component of multiple and varied investments across the Service to better understand and address resource challenges on park lands stemming from climate change. This additional funding would support an array of critical projects that sustain or restore NPS operations during and after emergencies, critical system failures, and extreme environmental conditions. Specifically, this new funding will be prioritized to address the most critical needs, including water access issues at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area where extreme worsening of drought conditions has caused lake levels to drop below operating elevations much faster than anticipated. Assuming reduced lake level predictions are realized, a mix of funding will be needed in FY 2022 and in future fiscal years to address the needed infrastructure changes. Funding would support low-water facility modifications, including permanent and temporary extension of launch ramps, retrofits of a buoy tender vessel, and relocation and reconstruction of docks.

**Question 2:** How will the National Park Service be funding its solutions to the boat ramp issue at southern Lake Powell?

**Response:** Please see the response to question 1.

**Question 3:** What is the anticipated decrease in the water levels in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area due to the upcoming planned release of water from Lake Powell to Lake Mead?

**Response:** According to the most probable scenario modeled in the August 2021 24-Month Study, Reclamation anticipates that the water level in Lake Powell will continue to decrease through the fall and winter to a minimum of 3517.31 feet by the end of April 2022. With the current elevation at 3550.69 feet, this will be a decrease of approximately 33 feet. Around May 2022, Reclamation anticipates that Lake Powell water levels will begin to increase with the spring runoff.

Reclamation is currently working with the Upper Division States to complete planning efforts under the Drought Response Operating Agreement (DROA). Under this agreement, Colorado River Storage Project reservoirs above Lake Powell may make supplemental releases to protect critical lake levels at Lake Powell. The projections for future Lake Powell levels include 181,000 acre-feet of supplemental releases from upstream reservoirs to Lake Powell that are currently underway and will be completed by the end of calendar year 2021. Under the DROA, Reclamation will look at monthly release adjustments at Lake Powell first before considering additional releases from upstream facilities. Future action, if necessary, would occur in calendar year 2022 or later. Reclamation’s projections of future reservoir elevations at Lake Powell will be updated as hydrologic conditions in the basin change and as DROA plans are
executed. These projections are updated monthly and are published in the 24-Month Study report (24-Month Study | Upper Colorado Basin | Bureau of Reclamation (usbr.gov)).
Questions from Ranking Member John Barrasso

**Question 1:** How would you change ticketing system at Glacier National Park to improve the visitor experience and manage overcrowding?

If Glacier will be utilizing a reserved ticket entry system next summer, the most important thing is to make that decision immediately and implement the system as soon as possible. The late roll-out of the system this year created mass confusion amongst not only the travelling public, but also amongst locals and businesses which serve our tourists ... hotels, motels, lodges, campgrounds, Visitor Info Centers, tour guides, outfitters, restaurants, bars, etc. — all of whom fielded questions from visitors that they had no answers to.

Once the system is fine-tuned and the decision is made, a comprehensive media/PR effort should be launched to educate those in the visitor service industry — and the general public — about the system and how it works. This would go a long way toward eliminating the mass confusion and frustration that we experienced this year. Coordination with local hotel, motel and lodge operators would also assist in getting the message out to visitors planning their 2022 vacations.

We have heard that computer-savvy folks (those able to write script and code) were able to manipulate the ticketing system and get their tickets ahead of the general public. This needs to be investigated and — if true — rectified in order to make the system fair for all.

At present, Reserved Entry Tickets are valid for seven days. Other than those camping or staying at hotels inside the park (who are already granted access for the duration of their stay), very few visitors to our area spend more than a couple of days exploring that portion of the park that is accessed by the Going to the Sun Road. Were tickets valid for 3-4 days instead of seven, that would allow more visitors to access the Road for shorter periods of time.

Some consideration must be made for those visitors staying just outside the park, particularly on the East Side. Visitors who stay at the historic St. Mary Lodge and Glacier Park Lodges, for example, do so for expressed purpose of visiting Glacier. Yet they don’t get the same consideration that someone staying at Lake McDonald Lodge (inside the park) enjoys.

Something should be done to make it easier for senior citizens and other who are less “tech-savvy” to understand the ticketing system and access the park. We have received hundreds of calls from visitors who are confused by the system and are unable to reach a “live body” at the NPS to answer their questions.
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Question 2: How does the ticketing system at Glacier National Park impact the economy of
Whitefish?

If anything, it has had a positive effect on the Whitefish economy. Those unable to acquire tickets are
forced to explore other areas of the Park and our region, and Whitefish is the #2 attraction in our corner of
the world. We are experiencing a record-breaking summer in Whitefish, in part because fewer people are
able to gain unfettered access to Glacier.

Question 3: What recommendations would you make to other units in the NPS following lessons
that have been learned from the Glacier National Park ticketing system?

Please see my responses to Question #1 above.

Question 4: What changes would you make in the Glacier National Park ticketing system to
improve access to the unit for citizens of gateway communities?

This is complicated. Perhaps local residents (Flathead and Glacier counties) who hold annual passes to
Glacier National Park could be granted single-day access after a certain time (i.e. 12 noon or 1 p.m.), or
have a separate process for acquiring those passes.

Additional consideration should be given to employees of companies who served the travelling public,
especially those in the West Glacier/Corumb/Hungry Horse areas. These seasonal workers take jobs in our
region each summer in order to explore the national park. Without that access, they will accept work
elsewhere and leave our tourism-based businesses without the staff needed to serve the customers which
Glacier National Park generates.

Perhaps companies in the gateway communities could apply (and pay) for a number of “transferable”
passes, which could be made available to their employees on a rotating basis. This would allow for a
limited number of “locals” to access the park on a daily basis, without overburdening the system.
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Question from Senator John Hoeven

**Question:** Gateway communities benefit greatly from visitors to our National Parks, but also have to bear the burden that increased seasonal visitation can take on public infrastructure and services. For example, Medora, North Dakota, which is adjacent to the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park only has about 150 full time residents. Yet, the nearby park sees about 600 to 700 thousand visitors a year. How important is it for NPS leadership, hospitality associations, and other groups to maintain a close relationship with gateway communities and other local stakeholders?

It is vital for Park leadership to develop and maintain a direct line of communication with those living and working in gateway communities. Decisions can not (and should not) be made by the NPS in a vacuum, as every decision that affects operations in the park has a direct impact on businesses and residents in the surrounding area.

GNP Superintendent Jeff Mow has done an excellent job of soliciting input and advice from these stakeholders, as well as from our local Chambers of Commerce, Convention & Visitors Bureaus, federal and state agencies and others affected by Park operations. He has also worked with us to promote visitation to areas and attractions outside the Park, in an attempt to lessen overcrowding within Glacier itself.

More must be done to allow our gateway communities to promote themselves within the boundaries of Glacier National Park, and make Park visitors aware of the many recreational options located in close proximity to GNP.
May 4, 2021

Mike Reynolds, Regional Director
National Park Service
12795 West Alamedia Parkway
Denver, CO 80225

Dear Director Reynolds,

On behalf of the Grand County Commission and the Moab City Council, we respectfully request the National Park Service Regional Office allow the implementation of a pilot timed entry system (TES) at Arches National Park as soon as possible but not later than September 1st, 2021.

As you are aware visitation management has been an issue at Arches National Park for several years. In the summer and fall of 2020 the park received unprecedented visitation. The City of Moab, Town of Castle Valley, and Grand County Commission submitted a joint letter of support for implementing the TES in May of 2020 (attached). The intent of the letter of support was to request the NPS to utilize the TES to manage visitation peaks to ensure a quality park experience, allow for efficient and predictable entry into the park, and most importantly to ensure safety for visitors and park staff. These concerns have only grown since then.

Starting in mid-March 2021 the Arches entrance station has been closing on a daily basis when the visitor facilities inside the park reach capacity, and the redirected visitation has subsequently led to frequent closures (due to capacity) of the Island in the Sky unit of Canyonlands, and even the Needles District of Canyonlands. Inaction is resulting in damage to park resources, fatiguing overloaded park staff, and increasing the safety risks for both staff and visitors. It is imperative that the Regional Office allow and support the NPS SEUG Superintendent to take action immediately to ensure one of the most iconic parks of the Southwest is protected, visitor experience continues to be enhanced and that the NPS staff is able to safely do their jobs.

Studies of a shuttle system, alternative entrances, and environmental and economic impacts of TES have already taken place. The Grand County Commission and Moab City Council have been involved in community engagement processes in parallel and with the NPS regarding the TES and other alternatives to manage visitation. Most of the citizens of Grand County and City of Moab support the TES at Arches; while the business community has concerns, virtually all favor improvements to vehicle congestion management, to which Arches visitation surges contribute. TES has already proven to be an effective tool in other highly visited national and state parks. While additional visitor facilities, and other management tools may eventually compliment TES, the time to implement this proven tool, requiring very little additional physical infrastructure, is now.
As the representatives of the citizens of Grand County and City of Moab we request, once again, that NPS please implement the timed entry system at Arches National Park, which will allow the Park staff to gauge its effectiveness during the busy fall season at Arches National Park.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary McGinn
Grand County Commission Chair
July 27, 2021

The Honorable Angus King  
Chair  
Subcommittee on National Parks  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steve Daines  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on National Parks  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair King, Ranking Member Daines and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR), thank you for bringing attention to the recreation experience in national parks by holding tomorrow’s hearing on the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences, and strategic approaches to visitor use management. We are pleased to provide the perspective of the outdoor recreation industry and share strategies and opportunities to maintain a sustainable and memorable visitor experience in our national parks.

ORR is the nation’s leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations — made up of 34 national members, as well as other non-profit organizations and business entities — serving more than 110,000 businesses. According to the most recent data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis released last year, the recreation industry generated $788 billion in economic output, accounted for 2.1 percent of GDP, supported 5.2 million jobs, and was growing faster than the economy in every indicator.

COVID-19 turned a spotlight on the outdoor recreation industry like never before. As Americans craved safe, rejuvenating activities during the pandemic, millions turned to the outdoors — many for the first time. A survey published in May 2020 found that 81 percent of Americans had already spent time outside at that point in the pandemic, with 32.5 percent turning to outdoor recreation for the first time. 8.1 million more Americans hiked in 2020 vs. 2019 (a 16.3 percent increase), and the total percentage of Americans who participate in outdoor recreation rose from the previous ten years. Many sectors within the industry saw record participation numbers in the past year: freshwater fishing added 3.4 million participants in 2020, shipments of RVs reached an all-time high in the first quarter of 2021, new model powersports sales increased 40 percent in 2020 over 2019 levels, and retail unit sales of new powerboats in the U.S. increased by 12 percent in 2020 over 2019. These figures capture our nation’s recognition over the past year that outdoor recreation provides significant physical health, mental health, and community benefits. Importantly, new participants in outdoor recreation are younger, predominantly female, and more diverse.

While ORR celebrates the increase in participation, and the countless physical and mental health benefits of time spent outside, and their associated economic activity in communities nearby national parks, we share the Committee’s concerns about unsustainable visitor pressures on the National Park System. After all, our national parks are only as healthy and memorable as the support we provide them, and our shared American outdoor experience is only as equitable as those who can access it. Many of these issues — overcrowding in some places, and lack of green space and access in others — have been growing for years and the pandemic has exacerbated their impacts. For these reasons, we share the following recommendations for the Committee’s consideration:

- Invest in visitor use data capture and utilization
Currently, national parks primarily capture visitation data at park entrances and overnight campgrounds and share these statistics to the public monthly and annually. While this data is useful for informing processes within, and appropriations for the National Park Service (NPS), it is not particularly useful to the public, who lack real-time, transparent visitation data to make choices about where to recreate within a park or where to plan their vacation. NPS and other public land management agencies can invest in big data strategies with novel data sources like cell phone data, search engines, fitness tracking apps and social media platforms to provide real-time indicators of visitation use.1 In today’s increasingly connected society, visitors could interpret this data to make the best decisions on where and when to go for the park experience they want and what might be a more suitable or sustainable recreation experience at a land unit nearby.

- **Communicate openly with guides, outfitters, and concessioners**
  - Expanding reservation systems across the National Park System could challenge business operations and planning for guides, outfitters, and concessioners, who have forecasted attendance based off visitation policies in years past. Should reservation programs be expanded across national parks, NPS should communicate early and openly with these service providers and incorporate them into the policymaking process.

- **Ensure equitable access**
  - The rise of reservation systems could entrench a lack of access for communities without reliable internet access like those in rural America, as well as low-income, tribal, and/or communities of color. Proactive efforts should be made to ensure equitable access to reservation systems for all Americans.

- **Support surrounding communities**
  - When national park visitation breaks records, surrounding communities also bear the burden of increased pressure on roads, sewer systems, emergency services, and affordable housing. Congress should take an all-of-government approach to support communities surrounding national parks and other public land units by increasing investments to existing NPS community partnership programs as well those from other agencies including USDA Rural Development, EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance, HUD Public Housing, and the EPA’s Recreation Economy for Rural Communities.

- **Work with the private sector to highlight lesser-visited parks and promote responsible recreation**
  - NPS should see outdoor businesses as critical partners in mitigating visitor use impacts. By creating an advisory council to talk about visitor use across the National Park System and develop marketing strategies to mitigate overuse, NPS and the outdoor industry both win as the national park experience improves to the average user. Outdoor businesses, especially retailers, campground and marina operators and boat and RV dealers could be informed to point customers to the recreation experience they are looking for, as opposed to a popular destination.

- **Enhance Interpretation at Park Units**
  - NPS interpreters are critical on-the-ground resources to shape and manage visitor experience at our national parks. By increasing funding for, and supporting interpretive staff, NPS can helpfully intercept new and existing users early in their experience to promote responsible recreation habits and spread visitation use to meet visitor capacity objectives.

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1 Lawson, Megan, “Innovative New Ways to Count Outdoor Recreation.” Headwaters Economics, March 2021
• Re-examine FLREA to match modern visitation pressures
  o Since the signing of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) in 2004, visitation patterns have increased and shifted dramatically, and some parks have begun to enact limits on visitation. To ensure that fee revenue collection strategies continue to match recreation needs, the outdoor recreation community is ready to work with agencies and Congress to determine whether FLREA reform may be necessary to meet the demands of modern visitation pressures.

• Implement GAOA to expand public land access and address deferred maintenance
  o Finally, these pressures underscore the need for efficient implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which provided permanent full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and established a new Legacy Restoration Fund to address the deferred maintenance backlog across the public land system. By seeking swift implementation of GAOA, Congress reduces visitor use pressure by creating more recreation opportunities through LWCF and enhances those that already exist through the Legacy Fund.

We appreciate the focus of tomorrow’s hearing and see both Congress and NPS as important partners in stewarding Americans’ love and enjoyment of outdoor recreation activities. We look forward to working with your subcommittee in the coming months to support healthy parks, people, communities and economies.

We hope the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee in the 117th Congress will see us as a key partner in this work going forward.

Sincerely,

Jessica Turner
Executive Director
Statement for the Record from Marc Berejka
Director, Government & Community Affairs
Recreational Equipment, Inc.

Submitted to the Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks

Hearing to review the impacts of overcrowding in our National Parks
on park resources and visitor experiences
July 28, 2021

On behalf of REI Co-op, I want to thank the Subcommittee for its recent hearing on overcrowding in our National Parks and the pursuit of commonsense solutions.

As you may know, REI is an 83-year-old co-op and retailer of outdoor gear and apparel. We are dedicated to the notion that a life outdoors is a life well-lived. We fervently believe that time outside is fundamental to quality of life and, for that reason, for decades we have been connecting people to our National Parks. We now have over 160 stores, plus a robust online platform as well as over 20 million co-op members across the country. We also provide classes, outings and travel adventure to hundreds of thousands of Americans every year, with many adventures centered on the nation’s iconic parks. Our mission is to awaken in people a lifelong love of the outdoors – to educate and outfit them – and help them enjoy the many benefits of time in nature – irrespective of their backgrounds.

We spend a great deal of time thinking through how to make sure visitors to National Parks, and all public lands, have the best experiences. At the onset of the COVID pandemic, REI spearheaded the creation of a “Recreate Responsibility coalition,” starting in Washington State and expanding to encompass state and national coalitions. [See http://www.recrateresponsibly.org.] The goal has been to make clear and amplify guidance for how to safely spend time outdoors while maintaining access to outdoor spaces. Additionally, we have doubled down on promoting greater resources for local parks so that everyone can enjoy the benefits of the outdoors without traveling far from home.

Overcrowding in some parks is not a new issue, though obviously the situation has been exacerbated and broadened during the pandemic. Overcrowding puts lives and ecosystems at danger, and assets at risk. Over the years, we have developed several ideas for addressing these problems and we would be happy to talk about them further with the Subcommittee and its staff. These include:

- **Partner with the outdoor recreation community to advertise and educate visitors about less crowded places.** Each of REI’s stores has staff prepared to advise customers on their next outdoor adventure. In our own business, we host outings and adventure travel and have adapted to focus on less crowded public spaces without lessening the experience. While we partner with the National Park Service, we believe a broader range of partners could do more to advise visitors on less-crowded places.
• **Open rec.gov to third party platforms.** We also believe that making rec.gov more flexible so that websites like REI’s can allow bookings and reservations on our platform can shrink the education and access gap for making reservations.

• **Invest in broadband in national parks, in particular in parking lots and congregating areas.** Greater access to Wi-Fi in places where people already congregate will open up opportunities for collecting fees, alerting travelers to traffic jams, and leading visitors to less crowded parts of the parks. All of these technological upgrades require consistent broadband in place in remote areas.

• **Work across federal government to share information.** At REI, we were very supportive of the Accelerating Veterans Recreation Outdoors Act, a bill signed into law that creates a federal task force made up of the Department of Veterans Affairs and land management agencies charged with developing recommendations to better connect veterans under the care of the VA to those opportunities. Modeling other interagency task forces off this bill could help departments communicate with one another about visitor needs and direct visitors to the resources they need to find the right park for them. There are beautiful lands, waters and facilities outside the National Park System, as you know. We all can do more to share demand for time outside across those other places.

We also want to stress the importance of equitable access to our National Parks. While we believe investment in local parks are critical for everyone to reap the benefits of the outdoors, we also want to ensure that legislative solutions do not unintentionally deprive visitors of a long-planned trip to one of our more popular places. Policies like the Every Kid Outdoors Act help expand access to fourth graders who might not have had an opportunity to see one of our country’s natural wonders and we want to make sure programs like these continue to thrive.

We appreciate your focus on this important issue and look forward to working with you and your colleagues to make sure that people are able to enjoy our National Parks.