

**Statement of Craig D. Obey,
Senior Vice President for Government Affairs, National Parks Conservation Association
Before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
March 18, 2015**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCollum, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading national, independent voice for protecting and enhancing America's National Park System for present and future generations. On behalf of our one million members and supporters from every state in the union, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide our views regarding the National Park Service budget for the System's centennial year.

NPCA requests for Fiscal Year 2016 appropriated funding for the National Park Service of \$3,047,707,000, which is equal to the president's appropriated request, but rejecting his request to reduce National Heritage Area funding by \$9,737,000. This includes NPCA's priorities this year of meeting the president's request for:

- \$239 million in restored funding for park operations;
- \$113 million in restored funding for construction; and
- a \$40 million increase in appropriated funds for the Centennial Challenge.

This is a critical time for our National Park System and the National Park Service, which celebrate their 100th birthday next year. Our parks, though beloved by Americans from all walks of life and celebrated worldwide, are under significant financial strain. The centennial of this national treasure is a time to redouble our commitment to our national parks, local economies, and to the future generations for whom we hold them in trust.

We are hopeful that Congress will be able to address this year's budget and appropriations cycle through a more orderly and reasonable process than has too frequently been the case in recent years, yet are fearful that the Interior bill could once again face challenges. We acknowledge the tremendous challenge the subcommittee faces in setting thoughtful spending priorities for the varied federal agencies and programs under its jurisdiction, and are grateful for your consistent support for national parks given the constraints you face. NPCA believes the allocation provided to the subcommittee in recent years has been insufficient and emblematic of the unfortunate squeeze that is being forced on domestic discretionary funding in general. NPCA will continue to be a leader in calling for that to change. We are grateful to the full committee for helping to ensure the subcommittee had the resources to cover programs like PILT in FY 15, which was essential to the modest increase you were able to provide our parks. That said, we believe:

- the sequester must be repealed and, at a minimum, the original Budget Control Act (BCA) caps restored;
- the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act should be enacted; and
- the Interior subcommittee allocation is unlikely to ever be sufficient to meet the full needs of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the National Park System

backlog, or the Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS) programs, which should receive mandatory support outside of the Interior bill.

Although the subcommittee clearly is facing challenges, we believe our request is modest. To mark the 50th anniversary of the National Park System in 1966, President Eisenhower initiated “Mission 66,” which invested over \$1 billion in national park enhancements and improvements to visitor facilities throughout the system--\$7.2 billion in today’s dollars. By comparison, the Obama administration’s proposed new three-year investment for the centennial is worth 1/7 of that amount, and the \$433 million portion they request from this subcommittee for FY 16 is equivalent to six percent of what Mission 66 provided. Adjusted for inflation, the proposed \$239 million increase for park operations and \$113 million increase for construction essentially restores park budgets to FY 10 levels.

Visitation to our national parks can fluctuate, but rose 7% from 2013 to 2014, to 292 million people. Joshua Tree, Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton and Glacier National Parks saw record-breaking visitation in 2014. Visitation is expected to continue to grow with increased visibility of our parks for their Centennial, which has obvious implications for National Park Service funding needs.

For many years now, NPCA has shared with the subcommittee the impacts of compounded budget cuts on the National Park Service and the impacts of those cuts to visitors and communities surrounding national parks. We applaud efforts of the subcommittee in FY 15 in securing a \$39 million increase in park operations funding, as well as a \$10 million reinvestment in the Centennial Challenge, first proposed by the President George W. Bush administration, and now by President Obama, to leverage private donations with federal dollars.

However, even with those modest increases, the budget to operate our national parks has been cut by nearly seven percent in today’s dollars compared to five years ago. The National Park Service has experienced operations shortfalls ranging from estimates of \$500 million to as much as \$800 million annually. The investment in operations in FY 15 provided some relief by addressing fixed cost increases such as cost-of-living adjustments for staff, rent, fuel, utility, and health care benefits. Park managers continue to do the best they can with reduced levels of funding to operate and maintain our national treasures and saving from employee attrition. However, park managers will share with you that operating a park with insufficient staff has started to compromise their ability to protect resources from damages and provide adequate visitor services. The result of chronic funding deficiencies, particularly due to the sequester but not limited to it, have been:

- fewer park rangers and other staff providing day-to-day maintenance of parks;
- parks and park facilities opening later and closing earlier or more frequently;
- visitor centers operating with fewer rangers or closing altogether due to lack of staff;
- compromised science and resource protection and decreased day-to-day maintenance;
- fewer backcountry patrols to ensure visitor safety and prevent poaching and looting; and
- other impacts that compromise resources and public enjoyment and safety.

Additionally, over the past decade, the National Park Service construction budget has been cut by over \$227 million, or 62% in today's dollars, contributing to the now \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog. Deficiencies in operations and transportation funding have also contributed to the maintenance backlog, with the parks receiving about \$350 million less than necessary each year to keep the backlog from growing.

Polling we have shared with this committee several times conducted by Hart Research Associates and North Star Opinion Research indicated that 9 out of 10 likely voters agree that funding for our national parks should be held stable or increased. A strong bipartisan majority of Americans (73%) believe it is important that the parks are fully restored and ready for the national park centennial in 2016. The broad support for our national parks is reflected in the membership of the National Park Second Century Action Coalition, which NPCA chairs and includes the active membership of a broad cross-section of the travel and outdoor industries, historic preservation and conservation interests, national park friends groups and other philanthropic organizations, park concessioners, and other national park supporters.

NPCA and the coalition advocated, and the Obama administration has proposed a multi-year centennial initiative that builds on the one proposed by the George W. Bush administration. The administration proposes to reinvest in national parks and to begin addressing the maintenance backlog both through discretionary and mandatory funding approaches. The fact that Presidents Bush and Obama both have supported strong centennial efforts provides further evidence of broad, nonpartisan support for the parks, which I know this subcommittee shares. The question now is: what will Congress do? We sincerely hope this subcommittee and your colleagues outside this subcommittee will seize this moment to produce a legacy that will be looked upon fondly both now and 50-to-100 years from now.

The proposed \$239 million increase for park operations focuses predominantly on enhancing cyclic maintenance funding, while also enhancing the visitor experience, better connecting young people with their natural and cultural heritage, improving the NPS focus on the important impacts of the civil rights movement, and helping to ensure that park visitors can find a park ranger when they need one. The proposed increase of \$113 million for the construction account will help address the deferred maintenance backlog by supporting the replacement and repair of water systems essential to public health and the visiting experience, the repair of visitor facilities and trails, and the removal of some excess, dilapidated structures.

Under current allocations established by the BCA and sequester, it is difficult to see how this subcommittee will ever be able to address the \$11.5 billion backlog. So, the administration again proposes, and we support, enacting legislation to begin reducing the backlog through a mandatory account. An initiative that attacks the backlog would produce needed construction jobs while restoring America's treasures. A flaw in the administration's proposal, however, is that their budget completely ignores the transportation-related half of the backlog. Ironically, Mission 66 occurred in the context of investments in the Interstate Highway System. Yet, so far, neither the administration nor congressional proposals attempt to improve the current \$240 million allocation for national parks under the transportation bill and reduce the backlog.

On the other hand, the administration was correct to propose enacting and funding the Bush administration-proposed Centennial Challenge. As we seek to enact legislation to authorize this innovative program, we hope the subcommittee is in the position again this year to invest discretionary resources to get the Challenge off the ground. By building on last year's \$10 million investment with the additional \$40 million the administration proposes, the subcommittee can leverage scarce federal dollars to produce even greater non-federal investments for signature projects at parks throughout the country.

We also support the administration's request of \$178 million for the National Park Service's portion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a critical tool for protecting our national parks. Park Service LWCF funding has declined from \$126 million in FY 10 to less than \$100 million in FY 15, a decline of more than 20%. The administration proposes partially funding LWCF with mandatory funds in FY 16 and providing full funding with mandatory funding starting in FY 17. The acquisition of inholdings is directly related to better managing the places in which our nation already has made a significant investment. LWCF boosts access and the recreation economy; reduces administrative and management costs; reduces the threat of fire and invasive species introduction; and has many other benefits.

We are grateful that this subcommittee has supported two extensions of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), which has currently been extended through the end of FY 16. If not reauthorized, public lands could lose over \$300 million annually to support maintenance, education, and other priority projects, with national parks making up about 2/3 of that amount. The administration proposes an extension to September 30, 2017 until a long term reauthorization can occur. As NPCA continue to advocate for a long term reauthorization of FLREA with the respective authorizing committees, we hope the subcommittee will continue to support annual extensions, as necessary. Currently, without reauthorization by September 30, 2015, the agencies will lose their authority to issue the annual pass.

Finally, we reject the administration's request to cut the National Heritage Area funding by 50%, or \$9,737,000, as well as specifically realign \$650,000 of program budget from the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to the general National Park Service operations account.

Overall, the budget for the National Park Service constitutes less than 1/15th of one percent of the federal budget, and our research shows that the average American household pays roughly as much in income taxes for their national parks as it would cost to buy a cup of coffee. Now is the time to reinvest in our national parks and prepare them for another hundred years of service. Every member of this subcommittee understands the deep affection the American people feel for our national parks. With the centennial upon us, it is time to make taking care of the national parks a priority. We thank this subcommittee for your leadership and are eager to work with you to build on the investments made last year, and ensure that our national parks are protected for generations to come.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.