



Statement of Craig Obey,  
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Before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Federal Land Subcommittee  
On New and Innovative Ideas for the Next Century of Our National Parks  
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Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas and members of the subcommittee, I am Craig Obey, Senior Vice President for Government Affairs of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). On behalf of our more than one million members and supporters across the country, I thank you for inviting me to testify today at this important hearing. Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading, independent, private citizen voice in support of promoting, protecting and enhancing America's national parks for present and future generations.

We appreciate your attention to the fiscal needs of our national parks and the search for innovative ideas as the nation approaches next year's historic National Park System Centennial. Many Members of Congress, including many members on this subcommittee, have expressed deep concern about the fiscal challenges facing the National Park Service. Years of underfunding have led to significant annual funding shortfalls to operate the National Park System and to the \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog, in addition to a backlog of needed land acquisition projects.

As the Centennial of the National Park Service and System approaches in 2016, we hope Congress will work in a bipartisan fashion to support "America's best idea." Now is the time to reinvest in our national parks, through both traditional and creative new approaches.

In 2013, NPCA partnered with the National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA) and the Bipartisan Policy Center to explore [concepts](#) that could provide additional funding and other resources to support our national parks. These concepts, which represent the ideas of white paper authors and not necessarily the institutional positions of the sponsoring organizations, have been provided for the record. They were attempts to foster creative dialog about ways to create a multi-faceted approach to addressing the parks' fiscal woes.

NPCA is particularly interested in those options that have the potential to provide significant additional resources for our national parks, including those that leverage expenditures of federal dollars in order to maximize the potential for partnerships with non-federal sources of funds. The examples I explore in my testimony include

authorizing the Centennial Challenge that matches private and public dollars for centennial projects, increasing the investment in the nation's transportation infrastructure through the reauthorization of MAP-21, establishing a national parks endowment, enhancing the use of volunteer service and stipend-supported community service work in the parks, securing care for our historic building through historic leasing, establishing a backlog fund to address critical maintenance projects, authorizing the use of emergency funds to pay for severe wildfires and reauthorizing and improving entrance and recreational fee authorities.

The National Parks Second Century Action Coalition, a large and diverse coalition of conservation, tourism, business, and others, supports many of the concepts discussed below, as well as increasing annual operations and construction accounts through the annual Interior appropriations bill.

### **Our Nation's Investment in National Parks**

It is worth taking a moment to consider why the subject of today's hearing is so important. Starting with Yellowstone and then, nearly 100 years ago with the creation of the National Park Service and the fledgling National Park System, our nation has invested in treasured American places that are beloved here at home and the envy of many throughout the world. Our National Park System encompasses magnificent natural treasures like Yosemite, Glacier and the Great Smoky Mountains; hallowed ground like Gettysburg and Fort Sumter; key locations pivotal in our nation's industrial success like Lowell; triumphs, tragedies and moral challenges we have faced as a nation, from Fort Monroe to Minidoka to the Trail of Tears; and other recreational assets from Lake Mead to Lake Roosevelt to Golden Gate.

These are all places judged, with almost universal public support, to be nationally significant and important to protect for our children and grandchildren—as well as ourselves. Collectively, after a century of investment, our parks have become economic assets and job producers for local communities, many of them in rural locations, and for our national recreation and tourism economies. For example, in 2014, visitors spent over \$405 million in the towns like Groveland, Mariposa and Oakdale that surround Yosemite National Park in California and support over 6,200 area jobs. These places are educational assets, provide extensive opportunities for outdoor recreation, contribute to public health, and support basic community infrastructure. Our national parks are investments worth preserving.

Yet, for decades now, successive congresses and administrations have put park resources at risk through underinvestment. Operations funding for the National Park Service is down 7% (\$178 million) in today's dollars from where it was only five years ago, which has led to a reduction in rangers and other staff to educate visitors and protect resources. In addition, the National Park Service's construction budget has declined by 62% (\$230 million) over the last decade in today's dollars. Between these reductions and insufficient investment on the transportation side, it's no wonder that the deferred maintenance backlog has grown to \$11.5 billion.

In addition, funding for National Park Service federal land acquisition through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has declined from \$86 million in

FY10 to \$51 million in FY15, a decline of more than 40%. The acquisition of inholdings is directly related to better managing the places in which our nation already has made a significant investment. LWCF boosts public access and the recreation economy; fosters more efficient land management, and can reduce administrative and management costs; including the threats of damaging wildfire and invasive species introduction.

Although our current level of national investments is not sufficient, the investments we have made in our parks over a century are significant, and have come in times of war and peace as well as economic prosperity and challenge. The achievements and investments during the Great Depression through the Civilian Conservation Corps are well known: millions of trees planted, roads, bridges, trails and other facilities constructed; hundreds of national and state parks created; and a legacy left that continues to benefit millions of visitors and hundreds of communities. More than 50 years ago, the Eisenhower Administration launched *Mission 66*, a commitment of \$1 billion to prepare for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park System, as part of a vision influenced by the development of the interstate highway system. The \$1 billion initiative that President Eisenhower launched and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson continued is worth more than \$7 billion in today's dollars.

Those cumulative investments have produced assets with enormous value—both emotional and economic. Collectively, our National Park System comprises over 75,000 assets with a replacement value of more than \$153 billion, including buildings, park employee housing, campgrounds, trails, water and waste water systems as well as unpaved and paved roads. These investments in our National Park System over the years are substantial, and are worth protecting.

And, of course, we preserve our national parks because they have value far beyond economics. They ground us in who we are as a people by keeping history alive. For many, they are spiritual places that provide solace, inspiration and renewal. They produce memories for families and friends that last lifetimes. Polling that NPCA and NPHA jointly commissioned with Hart Research Associates and Northstar Opinion Research in 2012 indicated that public attitudes about our national parks are extraordinarily supportive as compared to virtually any other topic. Ninety-five percent of voters—including 98% of Democrats, 91% of Republications, and 93% of Independents—believe the protection of our national parks is an appropriate role for the federal government. And when provided with context about the National Park Service budget, 92 percent indicate park funding should not be cut. The polling experts indicated that national parks are unique in their bipartisan support and in the potential for public support for bipartisan action.

### **Centennial Opportunity**

The 2016 Centennial of the National Park Service is an opportunity for Congress to come together to help reverse the decline in funding for our national parks. Preserving our national parks for future generations and protecting our national investment in them requires a new dedication to the parks. The Administration's FY16 budget proposal provides a blueprint for both discretionary and mandatory funding for Congress to reinvest in the parks, building off a plan originally proposed by President George W. Bush and his administration.

The Bush Administration came to recognize the fundamental need to better provide for the core operating resources the parks needed and proposed an additional \$100 million per year in discretionary funding over ten years starting in Fiscal Year 2008. That effort produced important new investments over three years, but then stalled. Since then, all the gains made in those three short years have disappeared, which prompted the Obama Administration to propose a budget that would begin to retake that lost financial ground, including \$239 million in restored funding for park operations and \$113 million restored to the construction account for FY 16. Those amounts would return funding to levels prior to the sequester, expand volunteer opportunities, engage youth, and better address regular maintenance needs.

Additionally, the President requested \$64 million for the National Park Service's federal portion of LWCF in FY16, as well as critically-needed proposal to fund additional projects with mandatory funding in FY 16 and FY 17. The President also proposes a \$40 million increase for the Centennial Challenge, a matching program begun by the Bush Administration that invites individuals, foundations, businesses, and other non-federal entities to match federal investments to support signature programs and projects in national parks. In addition to these discretionary proposals, the President also proposed mandatory funding of \$100 million per year for Centennial Challenge and an additional proposed mandatory investment in reducing the maintenance backlog.

In addition to restored discretionary funding for our national parks, there are a variety of bipartisan funding proposals that could supplement, but certainly not replace, the annual investment in our national parks. In 2013, NPCA partnered with NPHA and the Bipartisan Policy Center to explore a variety of supplementary funding proposals.

Of those funding proposals, NPCA is most focused on the following:

**Matching federal and non-federal dollars.** Varieties of potential partnerships exist and should be augmented to best take advantage of funding opportunities. NPCA strongly supported one such partnership when it was proposed by the George W. Bush Administration, which recognized the extraordinary opportunity and imperative presented by the upcoming Centennial of the National Park System. The Administration also saw the opportunity for partnerships and proposed a Centennial Challenge—an anticipated 10-year effort to leverage private dollars with federal investments. The Department of the Interior received pledges exceeding \$300 million from non-federal parties when it announced the program, demonstrating the significant public interest in such a partnership. The down payment on the program, which stalled with the change in administration, yielded approximately \$90 million—including nearly \$40 million in federal commitments that leveraged nearly \$50 million from nonfederal sources in fiscal years 2008 and 2010. This investment—though far short of the proposed \$2 billion, 10-year partnership—supported projects in the areas of stewardship, environmental leadership, recreational experience, education and professional excellence.

The Obama Administration proposed a similar multi-year centennial initiative in 2015 and again in 2016 that built on the original Centennial Challenge program established by the last Administration. As a start in FY15, Congress provided a \$10 million reinvestment in the Centennial Challenge in discretionary funding which was matched by \$16 million in private contributions.

Examples of projects funded by the Challenge since FY 2008 include:

1. Yosemite National Park: Improves hydrology related to roads and trails to benefit the giant sequoias; reconfigures the Mariposa Grove Road near the south entrance to enhance safety and traffic flow; adds over 20 new accessible parking spaces; provides two miles of new pedestrian trail; and restores nearly four acres of giant sequoias and wetland habitats. Total cost: \$5.1 million; partner match: 80%.
2. Yellowstone National Park: Helps restore and enhance the original and only year-round entrance to the world's first national park by improving walkways, reducing traffic congestion and updating signage. Total cost: \$2 million; partner match: 75%.
3. Point Reyes National Seashore: Improves trail and extended access to the Abbots Lagoon and North Beach areas to reduce trail impacts to surrounding wetland and endangered native Sonoma shortawn foxtail plant habitat while accommodating better visitor access to reduce erosion. Total cost: \$100,000; partner match: 50%.
4. Boston National Historical Park: Completes critically-needed restoration of wooden cupola section of the Old State House, replaces outdated heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system, and provides handicap accessibility to the building. Total cost: \$1,409,200; partner match: 50%.

These important projects have provided hope that Congress will set aside dependable, mandatory funding for the program in time for the Centennial. Building on the lessons learned from the first iteration of the Centennial Challenge, Peter Kiefhaber and I drafted a white paper for the Bipartisan Policy Center that proposes a new Park Legacy Partnership Fund using mandatory funding. This proposal would provide for core infrastructure needs where matching funds might be difficult to raise, as well as matching federal dollars to leverage significant non-federal funds. The recent restoration of the Washington Monument after significant earthquake damage provides an example of how private money can be leveraged. At the same time, however, repairs to the sewage treatment infrastructure at Yellowstone are less likely to yield significant matching funding and will likely require a stronger federal commitment. The new Centennial Challenge could be designed to accommodate both scenarios as we propose in our paper, or the public-private philanthropic Centennial Challenge could be addressed separately from the backlog, as the Obama administration proposed in its FY 16 budget.

NPCA and the National Parks Second Century Action Coalition, a diverse coalition of groups supporting national parks, stand ready to work with Congress to authorize the Centennial Challenge, as proposed in the Bipartisan Policy Center papers, as one innovative approach to enhancing our National Park System as it begins its second 100 years.

**Fee authorities.** Another partnership approach involves fees. The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA)—which allows national parks to retain the fees they collect in order to repair, maintain, and improve facilities and offer educational materials and services for visitors—yields nearly \$200 million annually across the National Park System. Since FLREA was enacted in 2005 following an experimental fee demonstration program, the National Park Service has obligated approximately \$2.55 billion in recreation fee revenues, which have funded over 11,200 projects and services within the National Park Service.

NPCA is thankful that Congress has extended the law several times to ensure that parks and other federal lands continue to collect fees to benefit visitors. However, the Act is scheduled to expire again in October 2016. A year prior to that deadline, parks lose authority to issue the America the Beautiful (annual) pass, so the Act must actually be reauthorized before this October.

Unless FLREA is reauthorized, our national parks stand to lose every penny they currently collect in entrance and recreation fees. This amount is roughly equivalent to the size of the damaging sequester and more than the Park Service's annual construction budget in recent years.

We are pleased that the Natural Resources Committee recently passed a bipartisan one-year extension of FLREA, and we hope enactment will occur before the October 1<sup>st</sup> deadline. In the meantime, we hope the committee continues to pursue a longer-term reauthorization bill. In addition to preserving this critical source of revenue by reauthorizing or replacing FLREA, there are a variety of ways that fee revenue might be enhanced, from adjusting the cost of the annual pass for inflation, to right-sizing the cost of the senior pass.

**Long-term endowment.** An endowment for our national parks is another long-discussed partnership model recommended in the concept papers we provided. We would like to see an endowment authorized to augment long-term funding for the National Park System. However, we also recognize that an endowment will not address near term funding needs, and that it will take some time to build the corpus of the endowment to a level needed to make it effective.

An endowment should be created for the long-term, but is not a viable solution to the backlog. We believe there are other solutions with more short-term impact on the backlog, but that an endowment could be particularly well-suited to address other traditionally underfunded needs, such as critically-needed investments in science, education and interpretation, and resource protection. We suggest that the Congress direct the Secretary of the Interior to design an endowment, including a clear statement of purpose and a detailed governing structure and investment strategy.

**Transportation Funding.** Approximately half of the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog is repairs to park transportation systems, some of which are integral parts of the basic national highway infrastructure system. While approximately one-third of funds used to maintain park transportation infrastructure comes from the National Park Service's base funding, the most

significant source of funding is the \$240 million our parks receive every year from the Highway Trust Fund.

The Park Service estimates that approximately 40 percent of its over 9,000 miles of park roads are in poor to fair condition, based upon Federal Highway Administration standards. In addition, 42 national park bridges have been rated as structurally deficient by Federal Highway Administration engineers using National Bridge Inventory standards. This includes the Arlington Memorial Bridge, which is an iconic representative of the deteriorating park structures throughout the National Park System. The bridge serves as a major commuter artery for thousands of vehicles daily but is now partially closed to cars and completely closed to commuter and tourist buses between Virginia and Washington, DC due to severe repair needs. The cost to rehabilitate the bridge is estimated to be \$240 million, equivalent to the entire parks' allocation in the current transportation law.

Using the Federal Highway Administration's Sound Asset Management Analysis System, the National Park Service has estimated that it will need \$970 million annually over six years to bring its roads, bridges, transit and trail systems into optimal condition that minimizes maintenance costs. As Congress continues its work to reauthorize MAP-21, it should stop treating national parks and public lands as incidental or secondary assets, but rather as the core federal assets that they are, including significant transportation systems that serve states, communities, and park visitors.

How Congress and the Administration will choose to fund a reauthorization is an open question. But NPCA believes Congress should increase the dedicated funding through the Federal Lands Transportation Program and establish an account to specifically address huge backlog projects throughout the System, like the Yellowstone Loop Road and the Arlington Memorial Bridge, for which the cost to repair exceeds the capacity of the Federal Lands Transportation Program to finance. Legislation has been introduced in each chamber attempting to address these issues including Congresswoman Norton's *Save Our National Parks Transportation Act*, which proposes to increase funding for national park transportation infrastructure needs and to create an additional allocation for particularly large projects in parks and other federal lands. The *Developing a Reliable and Innovative Vision for the Economy Act (DRIVE Act)* introduced by Senators Inhofe and Boxer establishes the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects Program similar to the one proposed in Congresswoman Norton bill; however, it does not provide guaranteed funding.

**Backlog fund.** The current Administration proposes a critically needed investment directly to address the backlog by providing at least \$300 million for three years, starting in FY16, to address the most crucial non-transportation-related projects in the \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance backlog. Of the non-transportation portion, which equals roughly half of the \$11.5 billion total backlog of deferred maintenance, approximately \$2 billion is needed to address systems the National Park Service defines as critical. These are projects critical to public health and safety and to essential natural resource protection. Examples are roof, water treatment infrastructure, and bridge repair.

**Service work.** We support the Veterans Conservation Corps Act of 2015, which would help our veterans transition to civilian life by employing them in a variety of sectors, including conservation, resource management, and historic preservation projects on public lands. This bill, which proposes \$600 million for FY 2016 to 2020, could contribute to addressing the backlog of projects in national parks and other public lands, while providing important employment opportunities for veterans. Unemployment for veterans who have served at any time since September 2011 remains high at 7.2% overall, and approaching 9 percent for female vets. The National Park Service has seen significant savings from the use of conservation corps for various tasks. Given the ability of such strategies to stretch scarce dollars, we believe that more should be done to foster them among veterans, as well as young Americans and the many older Americans who are interested in deploying the skills they learned through a lifetime of work on behalf of our national parks.

**Historic leasing.** Although the subject was not examined in depth in the white papers used for the Bipartisan Policy Center discussion, historic leasing is another area worth greater attention. In instances where the National Park Service determines that it does not need to use particular historic buildings for interpretive programs, exhibits, or administrative means, historic leasing can provide a means to assure the long term care of historic structures while reducing the National Park Service resources necessary to conduct required maintenance. For instance, the Park Service acquired most of the historic buildings along a major road through Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park. Seven historic leases have been granted to commercial businesses in the park that cater to park visitors. In return, the park receives rent, and a portion of that rent is dedicated to funding historic property maintenance. In 2012, the park received over \$368,000 specifically for maintenance. There are other examples throughout the country including at Valley Forge National Historical Park, Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site and Golden Gate National Recreation Area to name a few.

A report by The National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2013 outlined a suite of actions that, if implemented, would increase the use of leasing in the National Park Service. Historic leasing is not the solution to address the entire backlog, but it can be one of many solutions to help address it.

**Improved Funding for Wildfire Disasters.** One form of disaster of particular relevance for this committee is catastrophic wildfire. More intense wildfires, longer wildfire seasons, and more people living near forests have caused firefighting costs to increase. This has led the US Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to borrow money from other programs, with appropriations bills having to use valuable funds to repay costs from the prior fiscal year. For the National Park Service, this problem has made it more difficult for Congress to make needed investments in our national parks. We support the passage of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act to pay for emergency wildfire suppression similar to the way other disasters are funded. We appreciate the support of Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas as well as many members of this subcommittee for this proposal and very much hope it, or similar mechanism, will be enacted in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

## Federal Budget Considerations

The continuing budget standoff is leading to death-by-a-thousand-cuts for our national parks. This must be resolved if America's nationally-significant natural, historic and cultural places are to recover and serve the public for the next hundred years and beyond. Sequester cuts affecting maintenance have, for example, postponed maintenance on trails and roads at Golden Gate, delayed boat repairs at Assateague, eliminated maintenance positions at Olympic and other parks, and produced other impacts that threaten the visiting experience and the economies of gateway communities. Without a significant deal on the budget, it is difficult to see how either the everyday operational or long-term backlog-related needs of the parks get sufficiently addressed.

Today, the National Park Service budget is 1/15<sup>th</sup> of one percent of the federal budget. In 1981, it was 1/8<sup>th</sup> of one percent. In that interval we have halved the share of federal revenue spent on National Parks. Our national parks are not causing our deficits. Rather, they are investments in our future. We cannot meaningfully address the deficit by cutting funds for national parks or the other nondefense domestic funding that comprises only 16% of the federal budget pie.

As Congress and the Administration work to address these very important fiscal issues, they should be investing in things that produce jobs and help our economy, and enhance our quality of life. National parks are such investments. The national parks are core contributors to a \$646 billion outdoor recreation economy and provide nearly \$30 billion in direct economic benefit annually, as well as roughly a quarter of a million jobs annually. They are also magnets that attract tourists from the rest of the world. The Administration's 2012 National Travel and Tourism Strategy notes that: "Park rangers are among America's most recognizable and beloved public figures." The strategy also observes that: "Overseas travelers to the United States who visit national parks or tribal lands tend to stay longer in the United States, to visit more destinations within the country, and are more likely to be repeat visitors to the United States. As the manager of many of these destinations, the Federal government is in a unique position to reach these high-value customers."

National Park Service sites accounted for a third of the top 25 domestic travel destinations listed by *Forbes*. As this nation strives to restore jobs, great opportunities lie in marketing our national parks to attract more international visitors to invest in our recovering economy. This system of popular and inspiring lands defines America and is a proven economic generator. The \$30 billion in annual economic activity supported by our parks compares to the annual revenue of some of the top hundred Fortune 500 companies including Google and American Express. Our national parks are clearly economic assets to communities around the country.

This economic benefit is coming with a comparably small investment that is nowhere close to commensurate with what National Park Second Century Commissioner Linda Bilmes has called the parks' footprint on the American mind. Yet, we know there are ten dollars generated in economic activity for each dollar invested in our National Park System.

We look forward to working with you to deploy additional, innovative funding approaches that can augment core, appropriated funding. The Centennial of our National Park System provides a unique and rare opportunity for the parties in Congress to work together to provide the leadership necessary to protect the places that truly constitute America's common ground—our national parks. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.