

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

December 16, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden Jr.  
President-Elect  
Biden-Harris Transition Team  
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear President-Elect Biden,

Once again, on behalf of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, we congratulate you and Vice-president elect Harris on your election as the president and vice president of the United States. We also want to extend our gratitude for your serious and thoughtful approach to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. We are encouraged by your plan to establish a 100-day mask policy at all federal buildings and want to make sure this extends to federal parks and public lands.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year, the Committee has expressed numerous concerns with the Trump administration's opening and operation of national parks and other public land sites during the pandemic. Rather than prioritize the health and safety of employees, visitors, and surrounding communities, the outgoing administration played political games, failing to issue consistent guidelines and placing thousands of Americans in harm's way. Our country continues to set records for new coronavirus cases, deaths, and hospitalizations, and it is imperative that your incoming administration establish clear safety protocols that reflect guidance from public health experts and the best available science. The time for playing political games with people's health has come to an end.

Over the past year, the Department of the Interior (DOI) has been criticized on multiple occasions for ignoring commonsense safeguards and failing to establish protocols to maximize the health and safety of visitors and employees.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> From failing to provide sufficient personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies and ignoring requests for closure from employees and local officials to failing to comply with local

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<sup>1</sup> Fears, D. & Grandoni, D. (2020, March 26). Thousands are crowding into free national parks. And workers are terrified of coronavirus. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/03/26/coronavirus-national-parks/>

<sup>2</sup> Grandoni, D. (2020, May 6). The Energy 202: National parks start to reopen as agency 'worst case scenario' projects staff hospitalizations. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202/2020/05/06/the-energy-202-national-parks-start-to-reopen-as-agency-worst-case-scenario-projects-staff-hospitalizations/5eb1a5e888e0fa594778fbfa/>

<sup>3</sup> Ortega, R. P. (2020, May 9). Visitors from two dozen states descend on Smoky Mountains Park on first day after reopening as officials slam crowds for not wearing masks and ignoring barriers to trek into blocked-off areas. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8304179/Visitors-flock-Smoky-Mountains-park-reopening-day.html>

face-covering mandates, the Trump administration has allowed political motivations to take precedence over the health and safety of staff, visitors, and those who live closest to our public lands.<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup>

Ensuring the health and safety of staff, visitors, and those in gateway communities should be DOI's top priority. Unfortunately, current DOI policies are wholly insufficient and fail to provide basic protections for employees and the public. According to recent news reports, roughly 150 National Park Service employees tested positive for COVID-19 between March and September.<sup>8</sup> At the National Mall in Washington, D.C., at least four employees have tested positive and one has been hospitalized, and at Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park, officials reported 28 confirmed cases within the park.<sup>9</sup>

The incoming Biden administration has an opportunity to right the ship here, but doing so requires immediate action. Earlier this month, you announced that your administration plans to implement a federal mask mandate on your first day in office.<sup>10</sup> Ensuring that this mandate is enforceable and that it extends to individuals on all federally owned public lands is crucial and a good step towards protecting agency staff, visitors, and public health at large. It is also vital that your administration reinstate the authority for park superintendents to close sites or sections of parks in response to COVID-19 outbreaks and meaningfully consult with local communities regarding increased public access and COVID-19 risks.

In this time of crisis, the health and safety of public lands visitors and staff must be prioritized over all else. I urge your transition team and incoming administration to work with public health experts to establish clear, consistent guidance for public land managers that ensures the safety of staff, visitors, and the communities that live closest to our public lands as part of your Day One action plan for the administration.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources

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<sup>4</sup> National Park Service. (2020, March 18). National Park Service to Temporarily Suspend Park Entrance Fees. Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/national-park-service-to-temporarily-suspend-park-entrance-fees.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Rudig, M. (2020, March 26). County Board of Supervisors issue statement to close Grand Canyon National Park [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.coconino.az.gov/DocumentCenter/View/33302/COVID-19-Press-Release---Statement-on-Grand-Canyon-National-Park-3262020>

<sup>6</sup> Federman, A. (2020, April 9). As National Parks Remain Open, Staffers Worry They Are at Risk. *Sierra Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/national-parks-remain-open-staffers-worry-they-are-risk-covid-19-coronavirus>

<sup>7</sup> Melamend, S. (2020, September 15). Are masks required at the Liberty Bell? 'It's a gray area.' *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved from <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-independence-national-historical-park-reopening-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-mask-20200915.html>

<sup>8</sup> Hotakainen, R. (2020, December 10). As pandemic worsens, NPS faces growing load of infections. *E&E News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063720425>

<sup>9</sup> Hotakainen, R. (2020, December 10). As pandemic worsens, NPS faces growing load of infections. *E&E News*. Retrieved from <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063720425>

<sup>10</sup> Merica, D. (2020, December 3). CNN Exclusive: Biden says he will ask Americans to wear masks for the first 100 days he's in office. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/03/politics/biden-harris-interview-jake-tapper/index.html>