

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

April 27, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt,

In consideration of the recent guidelines released by the White House on April 16, 2020, for *Opening Up America Again*, we write to request documentation and information regarding how the Department of the Interior (DOI) plans to reopen national parks and other public lands.

Given the gravity of the rapidly evolving public health crisis, we are concerned that reopening parks and other public lands in the absence of clear safeguards and guidance will jeopardize the health and safety of visitors, employees, and those who live closest to our public lands. There have already been numerous reports of overcrowding and high visitation at national parks and public land sites during the pandemic that prevented visitors and employees from maintaining the social distancing called for by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and at least ten National Park Service (NPS) employees have tested positive for the virus.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> On March 31, 2020, we wrote you to express our concerns with your decision to keep many national parks and other public lands open during the coronavirus pandemic and urge you to establish clear safety protocols for employees and visitors consistent with federal and state guidelines.<sup>4</sup> These concerns were echoed in an April 3, 2020, memorandum from the Director of the NPS Office of Public Health, which stated that “continued NPS visitation not only threatens our

<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> 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>3</sup> Grandoni, D. (2020, April 1). The Energy 202: Worry spreads among national park staff after seven workers contract coronavirus. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202/2020/04/01/the-energy-202-worry-spreads-among-national-park-staff-after-seven-workers-contract-coronavirus/5e83901c88e0fa101a757190/>

<sup>4</sup> Haaland, D. et al. (2020, March 31). *Congresswoman Debra Haaland et al. to the Honorable David Bernhardt, Secretary of the Interior* [Letter]. Retrieved from <https://naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Grijalva%20Haaland%20Letter%20to%20Bernhardt%20on%20Parks%20Closures%20and%20Coronavirus%20March%2031%202020.pdf>

workforce, but uniquely enhances COVID-19 risks in the neighboring communities and visitors and increases the risks of negative outcomes for all.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, in spite of these concerns and the rising number of confirmed cases of coronavirus in the U.S., the administration has continued to encourage public lands visits without implementing clear protocols to ensure the health and safety of visitors and employees. In fact, earlier this week, President Trump announced that the administration “will begin to reopen our national parks and public lands for the American people to enjoy.”<sup>6</sup> While we recognize the benefits our public lands provide during this difficult time, waiving entrance fees at parks to make it “a little easier for the American public to enjoy the outdoors” and ignoring requests from NPS employees and local officials for closure threaten to undermine efforts to combat this crisis.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

In the face of this unprecedented crisis, it is crucial that any decisions to reopen national parks and other public land sites prioritize the health and safety of visitors, employees, and local communities and that they are guided by directives from public health experts and local officials.

To assist the Committee with its oversight activities and to address outstanding questions regarding the Department of the Interior’s plans to reopen national parks and public land sites consistent with the guidelines for *Opening Up America Again*, please provide the following documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than May 8, 2020:

- Documentation detailing how DOI will determine when it is appropriate to reopen, or to keep open, parks and other public land sites.
- A breakdown of the specific guidance and/or criteria DOI will provide to reopen closed facilities, units, and sites.

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<sup>5</sup> Newman, S. (2020, April 3.) *Public Health Recommendations Related to COVID-19* [Memorandum]. National Park Service Office of Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/uploads-wysiwig/OPH%20Memo%20to%20NPS%20Director%20COVID-19%204.3.20.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Adragna, A. (2020, April 22). Trump calls for national parks, public lands to begin reopening. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/energy/whiteboard/2020/04/trump-calls-for-national-parks-public-lands-to-begin-reopening-3979675>

<sup>7</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>8</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>9</sup> Federman, Adam. (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>

- A timeline specifying when DOI plans to begin reopening parks and other public land sites that are currently closed.
- Documentation outlining DOI's plans to consult with stakeholders – including DOI employees, scientists, and state, tribal, and local officials – to ensure that any decisions to reopen, or to keep open, parks and other public land sites reflect local conditions and prioritize public health.
- Documentation specifying the protocols and processes DOI will implement to ensure visitor safety when reopening, or deciding to keep open, parks and other public land sites.
- Documentation specifying the protocols and processes DOI will implement to ensure employee safety when reopening, or deciding to keep open, parks and other public land sites.
- Any documentation and/or information related to how DOI plans to house NPS employees, seasonal staff, trail crews, and fire crews, consistent with federal and state guidelines.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact the National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-6065. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Debra Haaland  
Chair  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests  
and Public Lands



Jared Huffman  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and  
Wildlife



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources



Alan Lowenthal  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral  
Resources



Ruben Gallego  
Chair  
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the  
United States



Diana DeGette  
Member of Congress



Joe Neguse  
Member of Congress



Darren Soto  
Member of Congress



Wm. Lacy Clay  
Member of Congress



A. Donald McEachin  
Member of Congress



Ed Case  
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress