



Statement of Richard G. Ring
Executive Council Member, Coalition to Protect America's National Parks
concerning the impact of the federal government shutdown on the National Park
System and the National Park Service.
Democratic Steering & Policy Committee
House of Representatives
January 15, 2019

Rep. DeLauro, Rep. Swalwell, and members of the Steering and Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (Coalition) to share our views on and to address the effects of the current government shutdown on the National Park System and the National Park Service (NPS).

I am a long-time member of the Coalition, including having served on the Executive Council for the last five years. I retired from the NPS in 2004 after 36 years of government service, including 33 with the National Park Service. This work included my service as superintendent of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks, and as associate director, park operations and education, and associate director of administration, business practices, and workforce development. The Coalition is comprised of more than 1,600 members who collectively have more than 35,000 years of experience managing and protecting national parks. We believe that our parks and public lands represent the very best of America, and advocate for their protection.

The Coalition believes acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt should immediately close national parks until the shutdown is over, to prevent any further damage to these critical national treasures. Without park rangers and maintenance personnel to safeguard the lives of visitors and our natural and cultural resources, the parks and the people who visit them are in danger.

Resources are being damaged and put at risk of further irreparable harm. There are already reports of damage to our irreplaceable resources at parks that were directed to remain open. Destruction of iconic resources, widespread accumulation of trash and related habituation of wildlife, human waste on trails due to closed restrooms, vandalism of property, and destruction of habitat from off-road vehicle use have all been reported.

Understanding the full extent of these impacts is obstructed by direction from the National Park Service that superintendents are not to talk to the press, but to refer inquiries to Washington, where requests for interviews are refused.

Further, under the condition parks are being kept open, visitors are being subjected to a degraded experience that could hardly be called enjoyable, often exposing them to health and safety risks.

The shutdown is also having a serious and adverse effect on NPS employees and the local economies and communities that surround the national parks. Over 21,000 NPS employees have been sent home as non-essential. They are not being paid, do not know when they will be called back to work, and are faced with increasingly severe personal hardship in meeting their personal and family financial obligations. Additionally, over 3,200 NPS employees have been required to continue working as essential employees. However, they too are receiving no pay and are facing the same increasing personal financial pressures to survive. This situation, in itself, is unconscionable, and regardless of the outcome of the shutdown, will have long-term adverse effects on the morale and retention of these men and women.

Equally, the loss of these salaries to the local communities and the disruption to the levels of visitor spending in local communities is having similar and substantial effects on individuals and businesses around the parks.

The Department of the Interior (DOI) has instructed the NPS to make use of unobligated balances of fee money to pay certain park employees in order to perform basic maintenance and visitor service functions. Fee money was always intended to supplement appropriated funds, not to be used as a replacement for them. Further, it appears this decision to use fee money to keep certain parks open is a public relations action intended to minimize the adverse publicity that continues to grow due to reports of park resource damage and increased threats to visitor health and safety.

Even the use of these funds to bring back non-essential personnel to perform basic maintenance and visitor services provides only stop-gap relief and those funds will quickly run out. The fee money is not being used to pay essential personnel who are required to work, but are not being paid. These essential employees face increasing personal pressure and will likely be forced to depart and seek other employment as the shutdown goes on and as they remain unpaid, removing even the limited protections to park resources these essential employees provide.

Irreparable harm has already occurred to park operations and will steadily increase the longer the shutdown goes on. Many parks would normally be working on preparing roads, trails and facilities for the coming summer visitor season. Contracts for concession and other contracted visitor services would be solicited and negotiated at this time each year, and the hiring process for seasonal employees would be underway.

When and if the shutdown ends, that interrupted work will begin, but much of it cannot be accomplished in the time remaining before the onset of the busy visitor season. For example, the hiring process for seasonal employees that require background checks like ranger and fee collectors often takes 4-6 months to complete even after the personnel offices have certified a list of applicants and an offer of employment is made. Repairs to roads, trails, and buildings will be behind schedule and not complete before the onset of heavy seasonal visitation.

The Secretary of the Interior is charged by Congress with preserving the resources of our national parks and providing for their enjoyment unimpaired for future generations. We believe that, with the current approach to the current government shutdown, he is failing on both counts. Acting Secretary Bernhardt's direction to the NPS in his January 5, 2019 memorandum (copy attached) reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of his responsibilities and those of the NPS under the law. He describes the NPS Organic Act as charging the NPS with a "dual mission of conserving park resources and providing for their enjoyment." He states that, "We must provide opportunities for people to access and enjoy our wonderful parks, *and we must do so in a way that ensures the same opportunity for future generations.*" (*emphasis added*).

The NPS Organic act states that the purpose of the National Park System "...is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife 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." *While there are two purposes here, the first - to conserve and protect the parks - is unqualified, while the second - to provide for their enjoyment - has a significant qualification, to leave them unimpaired.* Mr. Bernhardt's memo overlooks this critical statutory distinction entirely.

We believe this shutdown needs to end and the parks returned to a fully funded level of operation. Until that occurs, there is no justification to keep them open on a pieced-together, inadequate, and unsustainable basis in order to diminish the adverse publicity that closed parks creates.

The national parks should not be held hostage in this shutdown, subjecting them to irreparable harm and exposing them to an unacceptable risk of further impairment while providing visitors with a degraded and, often unsafe, experience.

The Coalition will be glad to continue to work with you in order to help return the parks to normal operations and to understand and address the impact of this shutdown on the parks, the employees of the NPS, and the communities near the parks.

That concludes my statement. I would be glad to respond to any questions you might have.