

Testimony of Dan Puskar
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Before the Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
On the matter of "Exploring Innovative Solutions to Reduce the
Department of the Interior's Maintenance Backlog"

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Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on this critical issue.

I serve as executive director of the Public Lands Alliance (PLA), an organization created 40 years ago by and for the nonprofit partners of America's public lands. Our [135 member organizations](#) are operational partners of more than 600 parks, refuges, conservation areas, lakes, and forests with an on-the-ground presence in every U.S. state and territory. They staff visitor centers, hire and manage youth and veterans corps, conduct educational programs, and provide interpretive materials. Not only do PLA members save and leverage government funds when providing these services, they also annually contribute more than \$250 million to our public lands through their philanthropic grants, programs and services. By enhancing the public lands visitor experience, PLA members create jobs and support national and international tourism.

The vast majority of PLA members rely on public lands infrastructure to operate their organizations and programs. PLA commends this Committee, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, and the Administration for its focus on enhancing public lands infrastructure, especially those assets that have fallen into disrepair after years of neglect. Deferred maintenance is an overall drag on the visitor experience as facilities become worn or less reliable.

Through the examples and discussion below, PLA will encourage the Committee to:

- Create a dedicated, reliable, and sizeable funding source for all DOI public lands that eliminates the existing maintenance backlog while providing necessary routine and cyclic maintenance funding to prevent future backlogs.
- Incentivize philanthropy and nonprofit support for appropriate maintenance projects and other visitor experience enhancements by expanding matching fund programs, like the NPS Centennial Challenge, to other DOI agencies.

IMPACT OF THE BACKLOG ON NONPROFIT SUPPORT

The deferred maintenance backlog has direct and indirect impacts on nonprofit public lands partners. Consider the following examples:

- **Prince William Forest Park, VA (NPS):** Congress designated the park during the Great Depression as a retreat where urban youth could immerse themselves in nature. The park

welcomed thousands of children, who slept in cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration. Nonprofit partners like NatureBridge continue this legacy by bringing children and teens from the DC metro area for daytime and overnight environmental education programs. Unfortunately, the park's plumbing rests on the original pipes from the 1930s, which are not properly insulated and have a high risk of bursting in the winter. Consequently, buildings used for youth programs are closed from December through March. Additionally, the old pipe system has issues with backing up, which limits the number of youth who can participate during the already truncated season.

- **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, NV (BLM):** Red Spring Boardwalk is in dire need to replacement. Not only is Red Spring Boardwalk one of the most family-friendly destinations in Red Rock Canyon, it should be used regularly for school field trips and is perhaps the most significant ADA compliant trail. The old wooden decking is dry-rotted through in many places and creates a serious safety hazard. Patchwork repairs have been attempted, but the condition has deteriorated to the point of partial closure and one of its nonprofit partners, Southern Nevada Conservancy, is no longer able to take groups there for educational programming. Without a complete replacement, the boardwalk may be closed in its entirety.
- **Shenandoah National Park, VA (NPS):** As the philanthropic partner to the park, the Shenandoah National Park Trust is charged to provide a margin of excellence to park programs, not to support fundamental park functions. However, due to a more than \$79 million backlog and uncertainties in appropriated funds, NPS in recent years has asked the Trust to redirect its philanthropy. Over the past three years, the Trust has therefore provided over a quarter-million dollars of our philanthropy to trail maintenance. As a "hiker's park" with over 500 miles of trails, routine trail maintenance should be supported by base funding. This has distracted the Trust from achieving other core mission goals, shared with the NPS, including field trips to our park for Title I schools and critical natural resource research and management programs.

Directly and indirectly, the backlog is detrimentally effecting these nonprofit organizations capacity to provide educational and experiential learning to young visitors due to a higher-order need for visitor access and safety. PLA believes that barriers to access and safety on public lands are a core responsibility of the federal government and should not be pushed on to nonprofit or other partners.

A DEDICATED, RELIABLE, AND SIZEABLE FUNDING SOURCE

Whether it is a deteriorating road or bridge or a crumbling historic structure, neglected built assets on America's public lands can have a detrimental impact on the experience of visitors as well as the employees of land management agencies, nonprofit partners, concessioners and others whose jobs rely on them. Nonprofit partners are unable to assist with fixing roads – the primary source of deferred maintenance across federal public lands – or baseline assets like wastewater and sewer systems. Philanthropy is unavailable and inappropriate for these core federal government responsibilities.

Yet there are examples of infrastructure – such as a resource for which a public land was preserved (e.g. the Statue of Liberty or a historic lodge) or a source of recreation and enjoyment (e.g. a hiking trail) – for which private support can be marshalled. Take, for example, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, managed by the NPS in California. The maintenance backlog had resulted in unsafe and deteriorating buildings on Alcatraz Island. The conditions threaten the island's ability to host visitors

including the declining fixed wharf on Alcatraz. Maintenance backlog on trails, historic buildings, waterfront wharfs and restrooms erode the visitor experience. Because of the historic nature and private interest in Alcatraz, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy has provided a tremendous investment of more than \$10 million toward its historic buildings and grounds, and yet much more funding is required. NPS currently estimates the deferred maintenance needs of Golden Gate National Recreation Area at more than \$325 million. The private sector, even if led by an organization as sophisticated as the Conservancy, cannot be expected to tackle this massive charge.

PLA calls on the Committee to identify a dedicated, reliable, and sizeable funding source that can meaningfully tackle the more than \$20 billion of deferred maintenance on all federal public lands, including those managed by DOI.

PLA supports the bipartisan National Park Service Legacy Act (H.R. 2584 / S. 751) as one innovative solution. The bill provides more than \$11 billion to the NPS backlog over 30 years through receipts from onshore and offshore energy development that are not dedicated to other purposes. It scales this funding up gradually so that the NPS and its partners have time to prepare for larger, more complicated projects. Importantly, it also leverages philanthropy and nonprofit support by enabling projects with private funding matches to rise higher in priority.

PLA also welcomes the Administration's outline of the Public Lands Infrastructure Fund, which is funded by 50% of increased federal energy leasing and development activities over FY 2018 budget projections. PLA looks forward to seeing a complete bill or proposal to understand more clearly how the Infrastructure Fund would achieve its revenue target.

Though using different mechanisms, both the Legacy Act and the Infrastructure Fund rely on monies generated annually through the production or sale of energy on federal public lands should be invested in deferred maintenance projects on public lands. This basic premise is the underpinning of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as \$50 million provided by the Helium Stewardship Act of 2013 for NPS deferred maintenance projects. PLA supports this general approach, with the caveat that the revenue stream must be predictable and meet its multiyear targets.

In a final bill, PLA further urges the Committee to:

- Broaden the approach to all DOI public lands, including the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management. Although beyond the scope of this hearing, the needs of the U.S. Forest Service are also significant.
- Maintain an incentive for public private partnership, like the Legacy Act's use of matching funds to effect prioritization.
- Institute a gradual increase of available annual funds so that land management agencies can scale up their maintenance, contracting, or other staff to efficiently put these funds to use. Similarly, once the deferred maintenance backlog has been reduced to a manageable level, taper but do not eliminate these annual funds to avoid a new backlog increase in the future.
- Pair this focus on the deferred maintenance backlog with continued, coordinated investments in regular and cyclic maintenance and line item construction funding. Without these investments, the backlog will continue to grow, increasing in the long term both public and private costs.

INCENTIVIZE PHILANTHROPY AND NONPROFIT SUPPORT

As their budgets tighten, land management agencies increasingly have called upon nonprofit partners to fund deferred maintenance projects directly. Congress too has looked to nonprofit partners to tackle the backlog in recent legislation, especially the Helium Stewardship Act of 2013 and the National Park Service Centennial Act of 2016, by making new funding available for deferred maintenance in the National Park Service if matched at a minimum of 1:1 by private funds. Nonprofit partners have stepped up, delivering more than \$77 million in matching funds to Centennial Challenge funds alone since 2015.

Yet opportunities for leverage are uneven across DOI public lands. Consider the following:

- **Rocky Mountain National Park, CO (NPS):** Secretary Zinke recently visited the park to announce combined \$400,000 by way of a public-private partnership with the Rocky Mountain Conservancy to rebuild the Alluvial Fan Trail, which sustained serious damage during the 2013 Colorado Floods and remains among the disaster's most visible marks within the park. The money — a Centennial Challenge project that matches \$200,000 from the NPS with an identical amount from the Conservancy — will fund Conservation Corps hired and managed by the Conservancy, building skills in youth while simultaneously restoring a popular trail.
- **St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge, FL (FWS):** The refuge is the home of an iconic Gulf Coast lighthouse, which the Coast Guard transferred to FWS with a leaky roof, rotten floors, and more. Due to unsafe conditions, the site can only be visited once annually by the public. However, the Friends of St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge has worked with partners to fund a structural assessment that estimated \$1.6 million would be needed to fully restore and open it to a projected 40,000 annual visitors. To date, the Friends have raised more than \$725,000 and, with contributions from partners and the state of Florida, the tower and keeper house are being restored now. The Friends have also restored the lantern room and the light's lens; a late spring opening is anticipated. FWS has not been able to contribute any funds to this project.

In addition to highlighting the incredible impact of conservation corps on deferred maintenance, the Rocky Mountain National Park example underscores the value of the Centennial Challenge to national park partners. However, as this program is limited to the NPS, national wildlife refuges cannot partake in it and organization's like the Friends of St. Mark's must seek leverage outside the federal government.

Given the success of the Centennial Challenge, PLA strongly recommends that the Centennial Challenge program should scaled up and embrace other land management agencies. Although the tradition of private philanthropy is not as long in FWS or BLM as it is in the NPS, the example of the Friends of St. Mark's highlights its new emphasis, as does this Committee's longstanding support for a congressionally chartered Bureau of Land Management Foundation.

PLA believes there is a compelling need to supplement to the dedicated, reliable, and sizeable funding source with matching funds that can be used not only to tackle the deferred maintenance backlog, but also projects worthy of philanthropy that will grow the backlog if not addressed in a timely manner. Programs like the Centennial Challenge that can be used on deferred maintenance yet also tackle a broader array of educational and conservation needs give land managers in the field and their partners greater flexibility to deliver a meaningful visitor experience.

ENHANCING ACCESS AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The vast majority of deferred maintenance backlog issues can be attributed to a need to increase access to public lands and then to improve the experience of those who do visit these special places. Nonprofit organizations that partner with DOI bureaus like the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management share that mission and are eager to work with this Committee and their agency colleagues where appropriate and useful. As a representative of these partners, PLA stands ready to assist the Committee in any way it can to develop a long-lasting solution for the deferred maintenance backlog in all DOI managed lands.

Thank you again for the invitation to testify.