

**STATEMENT OF MARGARET EVERSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OAK GROVE
INITIATIVE
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC
LANDS HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES June 14, 2022**

Good afternoon Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on H.R. 7615 Lodging Options Developed for Government Employees, or the LODGE Act, and H.R. 6442 Partnership Agreements Creating Tangible Savings Act, or the PACTS Act. Also, thank you for the Subcommittee's continued support of our national parks and for enhancing access and opportunities across all our public lands.

Nearly 30 years ago, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and environmentalist Wallace Stegner, proclaimed, "The national parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst." The often-cited quote is as appropriate now as when Stegner first said it. But today, significant challenges exist across the National Park System that must be addressed to sustain these iconic, essential places. Facility maintenance and backlogs, equitable resource management, and National Park Service employee housing must be prioritized to ensure visitors find the same solace and respite in these special places as those that came before them. In 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) was signed into law and identified a strong bipartisan desire to address decades of deferred park facility maintenance and backlogs. And now, as throughout our history, Congress is again considering offering support to address ongoing challenges within the National Park System. Both the LODGE and the PACTS Acts have been introduced as new legislation intended to look at ways to provide additional tools to support safe and affordable housing for Park Service employees.

I am incredibly humbled to have worked at the Department of the Interior for nearly 10 years during two separate tours. First in the Solicitor's office and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as counselor to the Director, and later when I had the opportunity to lead both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service. In 2020, I chaired the task force for implementing the Great American Outdoors Act, overseeing the provision of nearly \$2 billion annually for deferred maintenance to federal agencies and \$900 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Currently, I lead the Oak Grove Initiative to help government agencies improve their internal processes and policies to better distribute funds to support communities while delivering conservation, recreation, and natural-resource benefits. The Oak Grove Initiative recommends

policies to decision-makers and delivers on-the-ground project support through public-private partnerships to benefit communities and conservation.

Much has been written about the challenges the National Park Service faces, particularly with parks located in communities where the housing market is tight or cost prohibitive. Throughout its history, finding safe, cost-effective, and available housing for Park Service employees has been a challenge. Employees are experiencing hardships finding modern, safe, and affordable housing. These hardships are increasingly effecting employee morale, and in several parks are having severe impacts in hiring and retention. And superintendents have identified significant challenges stemming from morale, hiring, retention and the worsening housing crunch on operations throughout the National Park Service. Gateway communities rely on fully functioning parks to support local economies. During the early days of the pandemic, many of these communities experienced hardships when park operations were disrupted, and housing permanent and seasonal workers became a major challenge. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an estimated 7.7 million jobs were lost in the leisure and hospitality industries. These sectors are critical to gateway communities. Without a long-term strategy to support continuity of operations within National Parks, these communities will suffer. Solutions must involve traditional partners, local and tribal communities, and industry that can deliver long-term support.

While serving as the acting director at NPS, I visited Mt. Rainier to see firsthand some of the housing challenges it faced. The visit was intended to celebrate improvements made to several of the seasonal and maintenance personnel cabins. While meeting with employees living in the park's housing units, they told stories about previously having to stuff pillows into the cracks that had developed in the walls to keep the night chill at bay. This was unacceptable then and remains unacceptable today.

During my time with the Department of the Interior, I was fortunate to be on Secretary Bernhardt's team that initiated and implemented a major, multimillion-dollar housing improvement effort at Yellowstone National Park that substantially upgraded NPS employee housing. This two-year project, still successfully underway, demolished and replaced trailers in poor condition with high-quality modular housing, upgraded aging utility lines, and performed other site improvements.

At his confirmation hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in October, Director Sams called the lack of employee housing "a critical issue" and indicated that addressing these problems would be a priority during his tenure. Director Sams recently held a Housing Summit to address this problem, and the Oak Grove Initiative appreciated being included in finding solutions to this problem.

As mentioned previously, superintendents are implementing solutions on a park-by-park basis. Superintendent Sholly at Yellowstone, for example, has identified funding from a combination of sources and continues to substantially upgrade employee housing across the park, including in Bechler, one of the most remote areas of Yellowstone. Accessible through Ashton and Island

Park Idaho, this area receives intensive backcountry use and requires a full contingent of National Park Service employees during the summer months. For decades, many of the employees at the site lived in a large 1970s-era trailer. But a heavy snow destroyed it in 2019. As part of a multimillion-dollar park-wide project to improve employee housing, Bechler received funding for two new housing units, which were installed in 2021.

While during the Housing Summit several examples were offered of creative partnerships and solutions over various terms, superintendents and NPS leadership were quick to caution against implementing short-term fixes that would create a cycle of quickly deteriorating housing that add to an ever-increasing maintenance backlog. We agree with the superintendents and NPS leadership and look forward to continuing to work with the NPS on durable polices that consider an approach that addresses the housing issue holistically. We also believe legislative updates are necessary to ensure the NPS has all the tools to solve its housing challenges.

LODGE ACT

The Oak Grove Initiative supports the scope of the LODGE Act and its intent to maximize partnership opportunities and provide clear language supporting public-private partnerships to increase the availability of safe and affordable housing within and in close proximity to National Parks. The bill would increase flexibility to enter into these innovative housing partnerships, which are similar to ones other federal agencies have used successfully, including the Department of Defense at installations like Fort Campbell, Kentucky and Camp Lejeune in South Carolina.

We support the LODGE Act and its goals to allow parks to fund housing projects off NPS property in coordination with community partners, exploring alternatives to in-park housing while developing a model that would create incentives for companies to invest in these projects. Specifically, we appreciate the approach that allows maximum flexibility to work with traditional and new partners to address employee housing. We appreciate that the bill recognizes the potential to partner with similarly challenged federal agencies and supports a holistic solution to housing challenges across the federal government.

As drafted, we would welcome the opportunity to provide small improvements to the legislation. In addition to the language currently in the bill addressing sustainable maintenance, we would recommend a preference for working with entities that, in addition to building new units and refurbishing existing structures, also undertake the continued maintenance of these housing units.

PACTS ACT

The Oak Grove Initiative supports the idea of expanding the ability of the National Park Service to enter into a range of cooperative management agreements to solve its current challenges, including employee housing. The cooperative management agreement model will particularly support facility-maintenance professionals with the myriad of operational considerations they face. Cooperative agreements could support all types of utility maintenance, snow removal, and testing to ensure clean water for employees and visitors.

As drafted, the new language adds Tribal governments and quasi-governmental entities to organizations that could enter into cooperative management agreements with the National Park Service. The Oak Grove Initiative would support expanding this section to even broader authorities that include non-federal entities, including state and local governments, Indian tribes, institutions of higher education, and non-profit or private organizations. Expanding this language would be consistent with other cooperative agreement authorities within the Department of Interior and other federal government agencies, including the Departments of Agriculture and Defense. These expanded partnering opportunities, closely coordinated with the government, have succeeded in supporting the agencies' missions and new and innovative thinking, while streamlining federal funding.

A recent example of a successful cooperative management agreement was the renovation of Franklin Square in Washington, D.C. Prior to completion of renovations in 2021, Franklin Square was in a state of deep disrepair. The park faced a litany of issues including poor lighting, non-ADA accessible sidewalks, and regularly broken fountains. In 2019, Congress provided the District of Columbia with the authority to enter into cooperative management agreements for NPS parks throughout the District. The District of Columbia invested roughly \$21 million to renovate Franklin Square including regrading for ADA-accessibility, installation of a modern fountain, and construction of a restaurant and pavilion and a children's garden.

Conclusion

Ultimately, solutions to the NPS' housing challenges should include opportunities to partner with gateway communities and state, local, and Tribal governments, as well as allow for entering into public-private partnerships. Internal policies must include a clear and definite plan for long-term management and maintenance, metrics to gauge success, and the ability to make any course corrections.

The Oak Grove Initiative champions government agencies improving their internal processes and policies to better distribute funds to support communities while delivering benefits—in this case to employees, communities, and the mission of the United States' best idea, the National Park Service.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.