



Written statement of

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On behalf of the National Association of Counties

Legislative Hearing Before the
U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

June 14, 2022
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's legislative hearing on H.R. 6442, the *PACTS Act*, and H.R. 7615, the *LODGE Act*, and for inviting me to testify on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs.

My name is Patrice Horstman, and I serve as Chair of the Coconino County, Arizona Board of Supervisors. I also currently serve on the NACo Public Lands Steering Committee and Western Interstate Region Board of Directors. Through my years of experience in local government, I know very well the challenges public lands counties face as we seek to provide the best services possible to residents and public lands visitors.

Coconino County serves as a gateway to some of the most important places in our nation's public lands system, including Grand Canyon National Park, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, and multiple national forests and national monuments. The county seat is Flagstaff, which is located about 140 miles north of Phoenix, the state capitol.

Our county spans over 11.9 million acres, and has a population of roughly 145,000. Private land makes up approximately 13 percent of our county, making our economy heavily reliant on tourism and recreation to surrounding public lands. The Grand Canyon annually hosts over 6 million visitors who spend more than \$900 million in our communities and support approximately 12,000 local jobs. We know firsthand the positive and negative consequences of the recent, large influx of visitors to our nation's federal lands.

My testimony today focuses on the need to build cooperative agreements between federal agencies and non-federal partners to maintain critical infrastructure on public lands and support the development of affordable housing for National Park Service (NPS) employees and private renters. H.R. 6442 and H.R. 7615 would help to solve these problems for the NPS and surrounding gateway communities.

H.R. 6442, the *PACTS Act*

H.R. 6442 would allow the Secretary of the Interior to enter into cooperative management agreements, legal documents that stake out the relationship between the NPS and a non-federal entity, with tribal governments and quasi-governmental entities. NPS currently has the ability to enter into these agreements with states and local governments.

Cooperative local agreements can help the NPS tackle the \$21.8 billion in deferred maintenance costs across its 423 units. The NPS simply cannot meet this need on its own, with many NPS facilities, roads and trails falling into disrepair, which then negatively impacts the visitor experience. The new authorities granted by the *PACTS Act* will bring about innovative partnerships and approaches to meet NPS management and reduce costs. Counties applaud Congressman Russ Fulcher for introducing this legislation and strongly support its passage.

In Coconino County, we have seen a successful partnership between the County and the Grand Canyon National Park. For example, the County provides Search and Rescue services at no cost to the NPS, which the county spends over \$250,000 every year to provide. Another example of how flexible partnerships with federal agencies provides important benefits to the community and the federal government is our work on the Museum Fire Sediment Reduction Project, a project currently underway

completing watershed restoration measures on US Forest Service land. Both USFS and the County have contributed \$3.5 million each on these mitigation measures.

H.R. 7615, the LODGE Act

Rapidly rising housing costs in gateway communities, especially in light of the pandemic, has significantly strained the ability of federal land agencies to recruit and retain personnel. Many more property owners now rent their homes to short-term visitors, rather than NPS staff or local private sector employees. The rapidly rising cost of housing impacts recruitment and retention of both the NPS and private sector service employees that rely on nearby affordable housing. Arizona's home prices have surged at a staggering rate. In 2020, home prices statewide increased by 9.1% and then in 2021, they increased an additional 22%. In April 2022, Flagstaff home prices alone were up 38.6% over the year before, according to Redfin. With the increase in home prices comes increases in rental housing.

In Coconino County, we see the consequences of inaction regarding housing for Park Service staff. As an example, job candidates to the Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP) decline positions due to the fact that they would have to live in Flagstaff, which is approximately 70 miles away. It's not only the distance, but also the availability of affordable housing throughout the region and state that makes it difficult for many candidates to accept positions within the National Park Service.

Staff retention and recruitment also makes the overcrowding of our national parks even worse. While we are pleased at the influx of visitors to the Grand Canyon and the many public lands destinations in Coconino County, the visitor experience is diminished when there are not enough staff to admit visitors in a timely manner or answer their questions about accessing specific sites. This can impact the ability to bring these tourists back to our communities for future visits.

While the NPS has the authority to enter into public-private housing partnerships, the current law makes these partnership opportunities unattractive to potential private sector partners. H.R. 7615, the *LODGE Act*, would help alleviate this issue by giving the NPS new authorities to develop employee and non-employee housing on and off federal lands through new partnerships with federal and non-federal entities. The *LODGE Act* will reduce costs to the taxpayer and increase the supply of affordable housing in and around gateway communities. Counties appreciate Congressmen Blake Moore and Jimmy Panetta for sponsoring this legislation and hope to see it pass swiftly.

In Coconino County, the shortage of affordable housing impacts our tourism economy too. We have seen the increase of investment properties that would traditionally be available for NPS employees now being rented out in the short term through online services like AirBnB and VRBO. This not only affects the NPS, but our travel industry because of the staffing shortages in the private sector who also struggle with the lack of housing.

Conclusion

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of our nation's public lands counties. Our national parks attract hundreds of millions of visitors from around the world and support good paying jobs in small communities across America. Counties urge Congress to enact the *PACTS Act* and the *LODGE Act* to help the NPS better manage its critical infrastructure and housing needs through expanded partnerships with non-federal entities.