

Testimony of Congressman Brian Baird
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee Hearing
Centennial Challenge Legislation

Thank you, Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop. I appreciate you holding this important hearing on the National Park Centennial. As you know, Congressman Souder and I are co-chairs of the Congressional National Parks Caucus. The purpose of the Caucus is to educate our colleagues on National Parks issues. The Caucus has organized briefings, advocated for funding, and worked to raise the profile of the National Parks in Congress. We currently have 50 bipartisan members from all across the country.

As we approach the 2016 centennial anniversary of the National Park Service, it is imperative that Congress, the Administration, and the American people renew their commitment to the great treasures that are our National Parks.

I would like to congratulate both the Chairman and Ranking Member for introducing their respective bills to establish a new Centennial Fund to help prepare for the centennial. The Administration should also be credited for seeking a change. The President, Secretary Kempthorne, and Director

Bomar have initiated an aggressive National Parks Centennial Challenge that deserves to be commended.

As this Subcommittee knows, our National Parks face chronic funding shortfalls. There is a current annual operational funding deficit of \$800 million and a maintenance backlog estimated between 6 and 12 billion dollars. This means our Parks are understaffed, sites are closed to the public, facilities are growing older and outdated, and roads are not maintained.

As you may know, Congressman Souder and I have re-introduced, for the third Congress, our own proposal for the centennial, the *National Parks Centennial Act*. The bill currently has 45 cosponsors, including 7 bipartisan members of this Subcommittee.

Our bill creates a National Parks Centennial Fund. It specifies that 60% of the money in the Fund will be used to eliminate the maintenance backlog, 20% for natural resources protection, and 20% for cultural resources protection.

It would also allow taxpayers to designate a portion of their tax refund, or overpayment, for the Fund. This would not replace regular Congressional appropriations, but would allow individuals to directly show their support and contribute to the revitalization of the Park System.

The legislation specifies a \$200 million target for Fiscal Year 2008. The goal increases by 15% annually, ending with \$612 million in Fiscal Year 2016. If contributions from taxpayer designations fall short of this goal, they will be made up of deposits from the General Fund.

Our legislation also requires a biennial report by GAO on the progress of eliminating the annual operating deficit of the National Park System.

Finally, our legislation requires the Department of Interior to submit four reports about the current state of the Parks and their future. This includes:

- A report on the historical, cultural, and environmental resources currently represented in the National Park System and recommendations about what gaps exist that the National Park Service could fill.

- A report on the National Park Service's outreach efforts to raise interest in the Parks among young people and different ethnic groups, including an analysis of local partnerships and recommendations for improving these programs.
- A report on the condition of roads and bridges in the National Parks and recommendations for repairs, replacements, and additions.
- A report on alternative transportation systems in the National Parks and recommendations for repairs, replacements, and additions.

I hope that the Committee will give serious consideration to the elements of our bill as it considers and develops legislation to address the funding challenges at our National Parks.

Each of the proposals that we are discussing today has good features that are worthy of inclusion in the eventual Centennial Act. While I do not want to prejudge the outcome, I believe a proper blend of the approaches set forth by all parties will have the strong support of Congress and the American people.

Regardless of what the final Centennial package looks like, I believe there are two key points:

First, we must invest serious resources into our National Parks. These are America's most cherished places. I would challenge anyone to visit Mt. Rainier, Zion National Park, or Yellowstone and not only be amazed, but also inspired, by the magnificence and beauty. We must also remember the lesser known, but equally worthy sites. My district is home to the Fort Vancouver National Historic Reserve and the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. While not as famous as the Grand Canyon, these sites are visited by thousands annually. Unfortunately, they have not been funded at a level that allows them to realize their full potential. The entire National Park System is worthy of our protection and investment.

Second, we must bring more Americans into the Park System. The Park-going population is aging. We need a renewed focus on bringing younger and more diverse individuals to these sites so that future generations will continue to appreciate the Parks and engage in all the activities they have to offer. To achieve this, we should review current outreach programs and consider new ones. Additionally, the Park System can and should partner with more local schools and engage in national education programs.

Preserving our National Parks takes a commitment on our part that all Americans need to understand. It requires careful environmental stewardship and hard work. But I am optimistic that we can make significant progress toward addressing the current problems facing our National Parks.

Again, I thank the Subcommittee for holding this hearing. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee to craft Centennial legislation that supports our National Parks.

Thank you.