

Statement for Hearing
House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
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Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the members of this committee regarding the longest shutdown of the Federal Government in American history and its impact to the National Parks. I currently serve as the Executive Director for the Institute for Parks, People and Biodiversity at the University of California, Berkeley bringing its academic prowess to address complex issues facing parks in the US and around the world. Prior to this I served with the National Park Service for 40 years as park ranger, biologist, superintendent and regional director. In 2009, I was nominated by President Barack Obama and confirmed by the Senate as the 18th Director and served until January of 2017. As a ranger, I was furloughed during the 1995 shutdown and for the 16-day shutdown in October of 2013, I was the Director and made the decision to close the national parks entirely. That decision was made in consultation with Department of the Interior solicitors and was supported by Secretary Sally Jewell. For the record, I did not receive any specific direction to close the parks from the President, the White House or any other political appointee. I believed then and still believe the decision to close the parks was a principled, and based upon the statutory responsibilities to “conserve the national parks, unimpaired, for the enjoyment of future generations”.

The US National Park System is universally respected and considered the best system in the world. Over 300 million visitors come to the parks each year, including tens of millions from around the world. Delegations from other nations come to understand how America protects these extraordinary places and simultaneously hosts millions of visitors. This is because there is a professional organization, employing some 24,000 public servants who devote their lives to ensuring the parks are both protected and enjoyed. Over 100 years ago, business man Stephen Mather wrote a letter of complaint to the Secretary of the Interior that the national parks of the day were a mess and not being protected and maintained. Mather insisted there needed to be a professional staff to run the parks and he looked to the military for inspiration and recruitment. In 1916, Congress created the National Park Service and for the last 100 years, the agency has forged a respected place in the American psyche, with the iconic ranger, who fights fires, rescues people and takes care of the resource.

When the government shuts down, the majority of the NPS employees are told they are non-essential, which in my experience, is patently false. The NPS employees are all essential to meeting the mandate of protecting the parks and the visitor. Without the NPS employee, both the park and the visitor are at risk.

For instance, at Joshua Tree National Park in the California desert, in December of 2017, the park hosted 284,000 visitors (NPS IRMA Statistics). The park is known for its rock formations

and the iconic Joshua Tree, named by early pioneers for its arms stretched toward heaven. Under regular appropriations, the staff would number around 125 and include rangers, interpreters, administrators, carpenters, plumbers, trail crew and fire fighters. There would also be many volunteers, working under the supervision of the park staff. These professionals greet the visitor at the gate, collect fees and hand out information that will guide the visitor to a quality and safe experience. Rangers patrol the roads for speeders, the trails for dogs off leash and campgrounds for unattended campfires. Maintenance employees empty the trash cans, pick up stray litter and maintain the toilets. Resource managers monitor the health of the ecosystem and restore areas that are impacted. They all work as a team, as eyes and ears to issues that may be developing such as someone driving off the road onto sensitive soils, or attempting to poach wildlife or a cactus for their home garden. The active presence of NPS employees in the park serve as both as service to the public and a deterrent to things that could harm the resource. It is no different than the uniformed guard or guide that stands all day in each room of renowned art galleries. Should we consider that the Albert Bierstadt painting of Yosemite Valley requires protection and that Yosemite Valley itself does not?

The decision I made to close the parks in 2013 had painful consequences to gateway communities, to people who had planned vacations, even to people who had planned weddings. Every day during the shutdown we worked to mitigate these impacts. Through the closure period we worked a variety efforts to allow some access, including funding agreements with some states for full park operations and a first-amendment determination for veterans to access the war memorials on the National Mall. The closure of the National Parks became the media and political face of the shutdown and contributed to the eventual resolution of an appropriation deal. I faced a withering Republican led House joint hearing for five hours, suggesting that the closure was politically motivated, which I strenuously refuted.

The decision by the President Donald Trump and DOI Secretary Ryan Zinke administration to leave the parks open and to furlough the NPS staff is an abdication of their stewardship responsibilities for our National Parks. Many of the issues that we avoided by a closure are coming to pass with accumulation of trash, overflowing toilets, visitor accidents and damage to the resources. In general, I believe the visitors who are still coming to the parks without normal services are respectful and want to do no harm, however they lack current information, access to visitor centers or to park staff. And unfortunately, there are will always be a few people who take advantage of the open and uncontrolled access to do intentional damage, some of which will be long lasting to natural and cultural resources.

Now the administration is directing the parks to use their fee accounts to pay park staff. On one hand, I am positive that the employees are happy to return to work and be paid. On the other, these funds were intended, by law, to enhance the visitor experience and the resource, not for basic operations. By burning through these accounts for operations, the parks will not be able to use the funds to address maintenance backlog and improve the park for the visitor.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide this testimony.