

Statement for the Record of

The American Society of Civil Engineers

on

“Encouraging the Next Generation to Visit National Parks”

United States Senate

Committee on Energy & Natural Resources Subcommittee on
National Parks

September 27, 2017

Introduction

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)¹ appreciates the opportunity to submit our views on the critical importance of funding infrastructure at our nation's public and national parks. We also want to thank the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks for holding a hearing on this urgent and timely matter.

Well-maintained public parks and public lands are critical drivers of our nation's economy, as well as a source of water for the 180 million people in over 68,000 communities who receive their drinking water from national forests and grasslands that capture and filter it. Despite the growing popularity of public parks and lands, chronic underfunding of our parks infrastructure continues to plague the system, threatening both safety of these infrastructure systems and the ability to meet the demand of a growing population.

ASCE's 2017 Infrastructure Report Card

Infrastructure is the foundation that connects the nation's businesses, communities, and people, serves as the backbone to the U.S. economy, and is vital to the nation's public health and welfare. Every four years, ASCE publishes the *Infrastructure Report Card*, which grades the nation's 16 major infrastructure categories using a simple A to F school report card format. The Report Card examines the current infrastructure needs and conditions, assigning grades and making recommendations to raise them.

In March, ASCE released its *2017 Infrastructure Report Card*², giving the nation's overall infrastructure a grade of "D+;" public parks also received a grade of "D+." From supporting industries such as lodging and restaurants, to providing clean water to homes, to giving citizens the opportunity to partake in recreational activities, the lands, historical parks, cultural sites, monuments, battlefields, and recreational areas under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers play important roles in American life. Significant and strategic investments from all levels of government and the private sector are long overdue and much-needed to close the growing National Parks deferred maintenance backlog of \$12 billion.

¹ ASCE was founded in 1852 and is the country's oldest national civil engineering organization. It represents more than 150,000 civil engineers individually in private practice, government, industry, and academia who are dedicated to the advancement of the science and profession of civil engineering. ASCE is a non-profit educational and professional society organized under Part 1.501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code. www.asce.org,

² <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/>

Investment Shortfalls Total Billions of Dollars

The National Park Service's (NPS) 2016 centennial anniversary generated a new wave of excitement for our nation's public parks. A record-breaking 331 million people spent an estimated \$18.4 billion in local gateway regions while visiting National Parks in 2016, a 7 percent increase in the number of visitors compared to 2015. The 2016 visitor spending supported a total of 318,000 thousand jobs and generated \$34.9 billion for the U.S. economy³.

Unfortunately, investments in our public and national parks' infrastructure remains woefully inadequate, and the NPS now has a deferred maintenance backlog of nearly \$12 billion, which includes \$6 billion for roads, bridges, tunnels, and parking lots and \$6 billion for non-transportation related projects such as eroding trails, visitor facilities, and water and electrical systems. The NPS manages more than 75,000 constructed assets, and over 41,000 of them – more than half – are in need of repair.

This summer, the House Committee on Appropriations' Fiscal Year 2018 Interior and Environment spending bill allocated \$2.9 billion for the NPS, a decrease of \$64 million from FY17 enacted levels. President Trump's FY18 budget request included \$2.6 billion for the NPS, including terminating over 1,200 full time employees – a total decrease of \$296 million from FY17 enacted levels.

Solutions

Fortunately, Congress has provided some federal funding options that – if robustly appropriated – could help close the funding gap needed for parks infrastructure. The nation's two most recent federal transportation bills, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP 21) and the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, include funding to supplement the deferred maintenance budget through the Federal Lands Transportation Program (FLTP). The NPS receives an annual sum through this program for a total investment of \$85 million. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, and other independent federal agencies with natural resource and land management responsibilities compete for an additional \$120 million available through the FLTP.

Federal funding, however, is not the only solution. In December 2016, Congress passed the National Park Service Centennial Act, which establishes the National Park Centennial Challenge Fund. This fund requires a one-to-one match of federal and private funds; directs the National Parks Foundation to create an endowment; and focuses fund investment on an identified list of signature projects and programs eligible for funding while prioritizing deferred maintenance, physical improvements to visitor services facilities, and trail maintenance.

³ <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>

Earlier this month, ASCE was proud to sign on as a supporting organization of the National Park Service Legacy Act, a bill that has bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate (H.R. 2584, S. 751). This legislation would establish a federal fund to reduce the deferred maintenance infrastructure backlog at our National Parks and would be financed using existing revenues the government collects in royalties from the onshore and offshore production of oil, gas, coal, and other mineral operations. The bill also promotes public-private partnerships by allowing the NPS to accept qualified private donations.

ASCE believes that our nation's elected leaders need to act quickly to address the growing gap in national parks and public parks infrastructure investment. Our recommendations include:

1. Charge appropriate user fees at the local, state, and federal levels and allow those agencies to use all collected user fees to support maintenance, operations, and enhancements to their park systems.
2. Encourage communities who benefit economically from parks and public lands investment to also invest in their maintenance.
3. Reauthorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund to support acquisition of land and easements at the federal, state, and local levels.
4. Increase appropriations for the National Park Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Forest Service, and other federal providers of recreational facilities to address maintenance backlogs.
5. Leverage partnerships between the National Park Service and other recreation facilities operators and private groups to better utilize facilities and compensate for usage.
6. Enact legislation to permit the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to retain all collected recreation fees for use at its facilities.
7. Renegotiate franchise fees with concessionaires of park and recreation facilities to increase return to support operation and maintenance of facilities.
8. Conservation and recreation advocates should collaborate and cooperate to benefit public interest in both conservation and recreation.

Access to and investment in our public parks remains a bedrock of American society and a critical category within ASCE's *2017 Infrastructure Report Card*. As President Theodore Roosevelt – the founder of the U.S. Forest Service and often referred to as the father of public lands conservation – said “There is a delight in the hardy life of the open. There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy and its charm. The nation behaves well if it treats the natural

resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value.”

ASCE believes our nation must prioritize the deferred maintenance investment needs of our public parks. Strategic, robust, and sustained investments in these parks infrastructure systems from a variety of sources must be made quickly if we hope to close the growing funding gap. We thank you for holding this hearing and for bringing attention to this critical matter, and we look forward to working with you to find solutions to our national and public parks infrastructure investment needs.