

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 19, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Mr. Secretary:

President Theodore Roosevelt famously said of our national parks, “The establishment of the National Park Service is justified by considerations of good administration, of the value of natural beauty as a National asset, and of the effectiveness of outdoor life and recreation in the production of good citizenship.” In the spirit of President Roosevelt’s words, we write to you to share our concerns about your stewardship of the Department of the Interior, its dedicated public servant workforce, and the National Park System and urge you to change course for the good of the American people.

We are alarmed by recent reports regarding activities that are clearly undermining the mission of the National Park Service and the morale of Department of the Interior’s workforce which has declined since you took office. Since the start of this administration, staff within the National Park Service have been silenced and ignored. Many of these dedicated public servants have devoted their careers to protecting our nation’s greatest treasures for the enjoyment of all Americans.

Since silencing National Park Service employees by blasting social media posts related to inauguration crowd sizes on Day 1, this administration’s hostile posture towards its workforce has continued at an alarming clip. Shortly after the inauguration, the President signed an executive order placing a hiring freeze on all federal employees. This decision was particularly short-sighted and harmful to the National Park Service, which has experienced record visitation despite having an 11 percent smaller staff compared to personnel levels from five years ago.

The President then released the Fiscal Year 2018 budget proposal slashing the National Park Service’s overall budget by 13 percent. This included a \$200 million cut to the Operation of the National Park System account, which would reduce base funding for parks across the nation and cut staff by 1,242 FTEs, reducing staffing at 90 percent of national parks. These budget cuts run counter to the mounting needs of the National Park Service to accommodate increased visitation and deferred maintenance and would undoubtedly lower employee morale.

In October, the National Park Service announced a proposed fee increase at 17 of its most popular parks, despite the fact that a fee increase occurred just a few years ago. According to a press release by the Department of Interior, the fee increase, if implemented, "...would generate needed revenue for improvements to the aging infrastructure of national parks." The National Park Service estimates that the fee increases would generate \$70 million per year, which is equivalent to less than one percent of the \$11.3 billion total deferred maintenance backlog. It is irresponsible to pass the burden of addressing deferred maintenance from the federal government onto the visitor, especially when the outcome nominally addresses the issue at hand. The deferred maintenance backlog must be addressed but not at the expense of entrance fee affordability. We have heard directly from representatives of National Park Service members that they oppose this fee increase as they fear that it will price-out many of our nation's families and decrease visitation. Furthermore, shortly after the proposed fee increase announcement, the National Park Service announced that for 2018 it would host only four fee-free days in 2018. This is dramatically fewer than the number of fee-free days in 2017 (10 days) and 2016 (16 days). This ill-advised decision was inevitable given your decision to slash the operating budget and demonstrates an eager willingness to transfer the burden of funding the National Park Service onto visitors.

Finally, on January 16, 2018, it was reported that 9 out of 12 members of the National Park System Advisory Board resigned after spending the last year waiting to discuss park-related issues with you. Under past leadership, the Board had routinely met with and advised previous National Park Service directors and Department of Interior Secretaries at least twice a year. Of particular concern was the administration's move to discard Director's Order No. 100, which was created with the input of a report developed by the National Park Service Advisory Board's science committee to provide guidelines for managing National Parks by taking into consideration climate change impacts to cultural and natural resources. Despite the board's involvement in the establishment of this order, the move to undo the Director's Order was done without consulting the board, essentially rejecting the thoughtful input of individuals who cared about the future management of the National Park Service.

In response to these resignations, Interior Department spokeswoman Heather Swift said that "we welcome their resignations" and "(W)e will now fast-track filling these new vacancies with people who are actually dedicated to working with the Department to better our national parks." These remarks by the Department of the Interior are dishonorable and provide a disturbing look into the hostile work environment over at the Department.

These past events only scratch the surface of actions this administration has taken to undermine the National Park Service and its employees. This administration's unraveling of regulations to protect our land, water, and air, along with a prioritization of oil and gas drilling over conservation, will undoubtedly have a negative impact on our parks. Furthermore, to blatantly ignore climate change and how it will impact the future of our national parks is unacceptable.

During your confirmation hearing you referred to yourself as a “Teddy Roosevelt”-type who would protect public lands. Unfortunately, the actions of this administration thus far have not convinced us that it values the National Park Service and its employees, or that it is a real priority of this administration to truly protect the lands and wildlife that are our common trust. In short, Teddy Roosevelt would be ashamed, and we urge you to change course, stand up for the National Park Service and its employees, and provide the stewardship of our public lands that the American people deserve.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



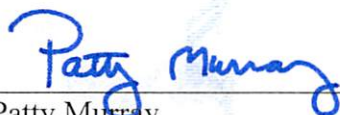
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



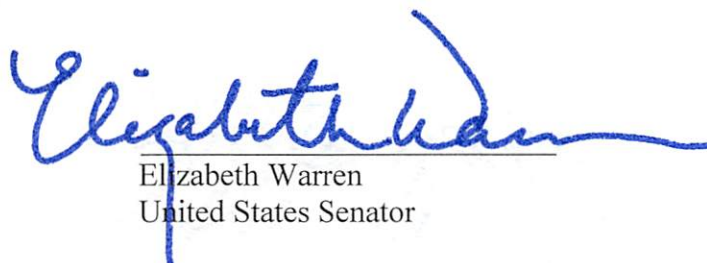
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator