



**To:** Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Republican Members  
**From:** Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Republican Staff,  
Sang Yi ([Sang.Yi@mail.house.gov](mailto:Sang.Yi@mail.house.gov)) (202-821-9930)  
**Date:** December 5, 2022  
**Subject:** Hybrid Oversight Hearing on “*Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks*”

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The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hybrid oversight hearing entitled, “*Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks,*” on Tuesday, December 6, 2022, at 1:00 pm EST in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building and via Cisco WebEx.

Republican Members are encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in person from the hearing room.

Member offices are requested to notify Sang Yi ([Sang.Yi@mail.house.gov](mailto:Sang.Yi@mail.house.gov)) no later than Monday, December 5, 2022, at 4:30 p.m. EST if their Member intends to participate in the hearing room or remotely via his/her laptop from another location. Submissions for the hearing record must be submitted through the Committee’s electronic repository at [HNRCDocs@mail.house.gov](mailto:HNRCDocs@mail.house.gov). Please contact David DeMarco ([David.DeMarco@mail.house.gov](mailto:David.DeMarco@mail.house.gov)) should any technical difficulties arise.

## I. KEY MESSAGES

- In recent years, a select number of iconic parks experienced increased levels of visitation. As a result, individual parks implemented varying strategies to address the challenges associated with increased visitation, which has contributed to overcrowding in certain areas of the parks.
- The National Park Service (NPS) should combat overcrowding where it occurs by entering into public-private partnerships, pursuing technological solutions to disperse individuals throughout parks, and marketing parks with lower visitation statistics. As parks pursue these solutions, they should remain engaged with gateway communities to fully understand the impact of the park’s decisions.
- NPS Director Chuck Sams declined the invitation to testify, depriving Members from directly questioning him about the National Park Service’s agency-wide strategy for allocating Great American Outdoors Act funding.



## II. WITNESSES

### Panel One

- Mr. Jeff Bradybaugh, Superintendent, Zion National Park, UT

### Panel Two

- Ms. Hannah Downey, Policy Director, Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), Bozeman, MT [*Republican Witness*]
- Dr. Will Rice, Assistant Professor, University of Montana, Missoula, MT
- Mr. Frank Dean, President & CEO, Yosemite Conservancy, San Francisco, CA

## III. BACKGROUND

In February 2022, the National Park Service (NPS) released its 2021 visitation statistics, revealing a total of 297.1 million recreation visits.<sup>1</sup> Of 423 National Park Service units, 25 units received more than 50 percent of those visits.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 44 NPS units had a record number of recreation visits in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

As popular parks experienced increased numbers of visitors, challenges associated with overcrowding in certain areas arose. During peak visitation, some iconic parks reached capacity, while others had hours long wait times for entry.<sup>4</sup> Some parks, including Rocky Mountain National Park, Yosemite National Park, and Acadia National Park, implemented reservation systems.<sup>5</sup> Other parks, like Zion National Park and Shenandoah National Park, required advanced scheduling for certain hikes.<sup>6</sup>

During a July 2021 hearing, NPS Regional Director Michael Reynolds noted excitement over the number of new visitors to parks and emphasized NPS's goal of ensuring enjoyable visitor experiences.<sup>7</sup> Due to the wide variety of visitation trends, he shared that NPS employed park-specific strategies to combat the challenges of overcrowding.<sup>8</sup> Superintendent Jeff Bradybaugh is expected to discuss how increased visitation levels have impacted Zion National Park. In 2021, Zion became the second-most popular

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<sup>1</sup> News Release, NAT'L PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR, *Most Famous National Parks Set Visitation Records in 2021*, (February 16, 2022), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/most-famous-national-parks-set-visitation-records-in-2021.htm#:~:text=Of%20423%20parks%20in%20the,least%20part%20of%20the%20year.>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Allison Pohle, *National Parks Are Overcrowded and Closing Their Gates*, THE WALL ST. J., June 13, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/national-parks-are-overcrowded-and-closing-their-gates-11623582002>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Protecting Our National Parks From Overcrowding*, CBS NEWS, May 29, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/protecting-our-national-parks-from-overcrowding/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Impact of Overcrowding in Our Nat'l Parks on Park Resources and Visitor Experience, Hearing before the Subcomm. on Nat'l Parks, S. Comm. on Energy and Nat. Resources*, (2021) (Testimony of Michael T. Reynolds, Regional Dir. for Interior Regions 6,7, &8, Nat'l Park Service, U.S. Dep't of the Interior) *available at* <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/7D641485-4958-4522-BA65-EF088BBC0D86>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

national park and the fourth national park to have five million visitors in one year.<sup>9</sup> In addition to discussing the park's tourism management plan, Superintendent Bradybaugh is expected to provide feedback on the Angels Landing Pilot Permit Program, a lottery system for distributing park permits.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. REPUBLICAN APPROACH

As national parks face the impacts of increased visitation, Republican Members can emphasize the importance of maintaining access to our nation's public lands. NPS should inform the implementation of pilot programs addressing areas experiencing overcrowding with feedback from both visitors and gateway communities. For example, a park's decision to implement a timed entry system not only impacts the operation of the park, but also gateway communities. Not only does a reservation system impact visitors' travel plans, but also the local businesses that play an important role in imparting local knowledge and providing important services to travelers.<sup>11</sup> As individual parks implement strategies to manage an increasing number of visitors, Republican Members should encourage NPS to actively engage gateway communities in the agency's decision-making process.

The challenges of overcrowding at a select number of national parks requires the National Park Service to have the flexibility to address their unique circumstances. This hearing presents an opportunity for Republican Members to highlight innovative solutions, through which NPS can leverage public-private partnerships and new technologies, to improve visitor experiences and mitigate the impacts of overcrowding.

Committee Republicans have introduced legislation that would combat the challenges associated with increased park visitation. For example, H.R. 7693, the National Park Foundation Reauthorization Act, introduced by Ranking Member Bruce Westerman, would reduce deferred maintenance at our national parks, advance public-private partnerships, and address park overcrowding.<sup>12</sup> The National Park Foundation utilizes appropriations, private funding, and strategic partnerships to directly support NPS.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, H.R. 7615, the LODGE Act, introduced by Representative Blake Moore, would provide a solution to an issue exacerbated by increased park visitation. The LODGE Act would allow NPS to enter into partnerships with non-federal entities and other federal agencies in order to develop employee housing.<sup>14</sup> Rising housing costs in gateway communities is creating a severe housing shortage for NPS employees, leaving many parks

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<sup>9</sup> K. Sophie Will, *State of Zion Nat'l Park Address: Chief Concerned About Overtourism After 2021 Record*, The Spectrum, Feb. 28, 2022, <https://www.thespectrum.com/story/news/2022/02/28/zion-national-park-chief-reacts-5-million-visitors-overtourism-plans/6942596001/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> See *supra* note 7 (Testimony of Kevin O. Gartland, Executive Dir., Whitefish, MT Chamber of Commerce) available at <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/A88D9BAC-B756-4AE7-8D00-F4F7683BA751>; *supra* note 4.

<sup>12</sup> Memorandum from H. Comm. on Nat. Resources Republican Staff to H. Comm. on Nat. Resources Republican Members (June 13, 2022) (on file with Comm.).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

understaffed in peak seasons.<sup>15</sup> Understaffing at parks contributes to longer wait times at parks, compounding the effects of increased visitation.<sup>16</sup> The LODGE Act would give NPS the tools necessary to improve retention and recruitment of employees by ensuring access to affordable housing.<sup>17</sup>

Hannah Downey of the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), the Republican witness, is expected to discuss innovative approaches parks could pursue to mitigate the impacts of increased visitation.<sup>18</sup> Innovative solutions could include utilizing technology to disperse visitors to less crowded portions of a park, increasing education about nearby parks, and implementing shuttle systems. Additionally, Ms. Downey is expected to highlight the importance of ensuring superintendents have the flexibility to implement individualized solutions at parks addressing increased visitation.

Republican Members may also raise questions about the implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA).<sup>19</sup> The GAOA established the Legacy Restoration Fund, providing up to \$9.5 billion over five years, to both the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to address deferred maintenance projects on our nation's federal lands.<sup>20</sup> In a March 2022 report, DOI's Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that DOI lacked a strategy to maximize the impact of the GAOA and failed to implement best management practices for deferred maintenance projects.<sup>21</sup> Committee Republicans raised significant concerns about NPS's nearly \$10 billion increase in deferred maintenance backlog and the process for selecting which projects receive funding.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Committee Republicans questioned the absence of several iconic parks from NPS's Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 project list.<sup>23</sup> Despite facing significant maintenance backlogs, Yosemite National Park, Zion National Park, Grand Teton National Park, and Rocky Mountain National Park were not slated to receive FY 2023 Legacy Restoration Funds.<sup>24</sup> NPS should prioritize maintenance backlog projects at our nation's most visited parks. Targeting funds to ensure parks are prepared to accommodate an increase in visitation is an effective tool for mitigating the impacts of overcrowding when it occurs.

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *See supra* note 6.

<sup>19</sup> P. Law 116-152.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR, GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT, *About GAOA*, <https://www.doi.gov/about-gaoa> (last visited Nov. 29, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR, OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL, 2021-CR0013, THE U.S. DEP'T OF THE INTERIOR NEEDS A STRATEGY TO COORDINATE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT (Mar. 23, 2022) at 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> *See* Letter from Rep. Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Nat. Resources, et. al, to the Honorable Debra Haaland, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of the Interior and the Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of Agriculture (May 17, 2022) (on file with Comm.); Letter from Rep. Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Nat. Resources, et. al, to the Honorable Debra Haaland, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of the Interior and the Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of Agriculture (July 15, 2022) (on file with Comm.).

<sup>23</sup> *See* Letter from Rep. Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member, H. Comm. on Nat. Resources, et. al, to the Honorable Debra Haaland, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of the Interior and the Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of Agriculture (July 15, 2022) (on file with Comm.).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

Unfortunately, NPS Director Chuck Sams declined an invitation to the hearing. Republican Members, however, may use this opportunity to inquire about Zion National Park’s maintenance backlog. Zion National Park currently has \$58 million in deferred maintenance and repairs.<sup>25</sup> Superintendent Bradybaugh should be able to explain how his park prioritizes projects, assesses deferred maintenance costs, and competes with other units of the National Park Service to receive Legacy Restoration Funding. He may provide feedback on the implementation of GAOA from an individual park’s perspective.

## V. ISSUES DEMOCRATS MAY RAISE

Chair Porter’s experiences visiting national parks led to the Majority holding this hearing. Democrats are expected to highlight concerns related to overcrowding and its impact on visitor experience and employees. Dr. Will Rice of the University of Montana will likely discuss equity and accessibility issues related to reservation systems at national parks.<sup>26</sup> He is expected to discuss how internet speeds, digital literacy, and language barriers impact individuals’ abilities to plan their visits.<sup>27</sup> Mr. Frank Dean of the Yosemite Conservancy is expected to highlight his organization’s partnership with Yosemite National Park.<sup>28</sup> With Yosemite National Park’s implementation of a reservation system, Mr. Dean may note the Yosemite Conservancy’s projects focusing on accessibility, including Spanish-speaking outreach.<sup>29</sup>

Democrats may assert that more funding is needed to combat the challenges presented by overcrowding. For example, the Majority may highlight the fact that between 2011 and 2019, the NPS lost 16 percent of its staffing capacity while experiencing a 17 percent increase in visitation.<sup>30</sup> They may argue additional appropriations, therefore, are necessary to increase the number of NPS employees. Further, Democrats are expected to conclude that NPS needs increased funding to address their concerns related to equitable access.

*Republican Rebuttal:* Additional funding has already been allotted to address these concerns. For example, Inflation Reduction Act included \$500 million to hire NPS employees.<sup>31</sup> Further, the NPS hiring process should be examined to ensure it is operating efficiently.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act directed funds to DOI to connect underserved communities to NPS properties.<sup>33</sup> Instead of advocating for

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<sup>25</sup> Nat’l Park Service, *Utah Parks Infrastructure Fact Sheet*, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/UT-State-Fact-Sheet\\_FY22Q1\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/UT-State-Fact-Sheet_FY22Q1_508.pdf) (last visited Nov. 30, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Michael Levy, *In the Scramble For A Campsite, Everyone Deserves An Equal Chance*, THE N.Y. TIMES, June 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/opinion/camping-parks-access.html>; Annette McGivney, *‘Everyone Came At Once’: America’s National Parks Reckon With Record-Smashing Year*, THE GUARDIAN, Jan. 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/01/national-parks-us-tourism-crowds-busy>.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> Bennett Rea, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sponsor Highlight: Yosemite Conservancy*, NATUREBRIDGE, Aug. 2, 2021, <https://naturebridge.org/blog/2021-08-02-50th-anniversary-sponsor-highlight-yosemite-conservancy>.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>31</sup> P. Law 117-169, §50223.

<sup>32</sup> See *supra* note 7 (Opening Statement Senator Daines, Ranking Member).

<sup>33</sup> U.S. DEP’T OF THE INTERIOR, NAT’L PARK SERVICE, TRANSPORTATION, *Bipartisan Infrastructure Law*, (last visited Nov. 30, 2022), <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/transportation/bipartisan-infrastructure-law.htm>.

more federal spending, the implementation of designated funds should be monitored to ensure their appropriate use. Republicans should also encourage NPS to utilize public-private partnership to effectively leverage the funding the agency already receives.

Democrats may also determine that overcrowding at national parks justifies expansion of the federal estate. In response to increased numbers of people utilizing our federal lands, Democrats may assert DOI should acquire more federal land or easements across privately owned lands along the perimeter of federal land to expand visitation options.

*Republican Rebuttal:* Overcrowding is an issue facing frequently visited areas in a select number of parks. NPS should continue to focus on increasing the public's awareness of other units within the park system. For example, NPS encouraged visitors to use its website to search by state to discover hidden gems near iconic parks.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, overcrowding issues often impact specific points of high interest, which are usually centrally located and easily accessible by automobile. Expanding park boundaries is not necessarily the right solution to addressing these issues, which are not necessarily limited to the perimeters of national parks. Instead of adding more federal acreage to the NPS estate, the focus should remain on addressing NPS' existing \$21.8 billion maintenance backlog.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Supra* note 1.

<sup>35</sup> NAT'L PARK SERVICE, INFRASTRUCTURE, *By the Numbers*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/deferred-maintenance.htm> (last visited Nov. 30, 2022).