

TESTIMONY OF REP. JACKIE SPEIER
To the Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests and Public Lands
May 4, 2011

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on my legislation, the Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act. Last year, this Committee extended me the same privilege, and I was pleased to share the story of the Buffalo Soldiers in my testimony, which several of you already know so well.

But much of the American public, including millions of our park visitors, are unaware of this great part of American history. The goal of my legislation, which is identical to the bill I introduced last year and which passed the House by voice vote, is once again to help bring that story to light.

The Buffalo Soldiers in the National Parks Study Act will allow the Department of Interior to study the role the Buffalo Soldiers played in maintaining our earliest National Parks, before they were even designated National Parks.

Specifically, the bill would evaluate the feasibility of a National Historic Trail along the Buffalo Soldier routes between their historic military post at the San Francisco Presidio, and Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. The study would also identify properties that could be listed in the National Register of Historic Places or designation as National Historic Landmarks.

The Buffalo Soldiers were among our very first park rangers. They understood what needed to be done to protect our public lands earlier and better than most – because it was their duty to understand it. Because of the color of their skin, however, they were all too often marginalized instead of respected for it.

It was the heyday of the gold rush that brought the first white visitors to Yosemite, many of whom were all too eager to poach, log, and overgraze the land. And it was African American soldiers who stood sentry at the

parks' edge. Guns were not allowed in the parks, and the Buffalo Soldiers were under no illusions that confiscating arms from whites seeking to bring them in would be without risk. But in the face of frontierism and racism, the Buffalo Soldiers not only weathered confrontation – they overcame it, they became neighbors and friends to the settlers in the park regions, and they made real inroads toward racial progress that were extraordinary for their day.

Although they were assigned to watch over government property for only a relatively short time, the Buffalo Soldiers helped lay the groundwork for those lands to be preserved forever. I am proud that the Buffalo Soldiers traveled through my district on their way to the parks. I am proud to help shine a light on the history they helped build in the great state of California and in many places across our great country.

All Americans, from all walks of life, should be fortunate enough to learn about this neglected chapter in American history. The Buffalo Soldiers' story is ultimately about the triumph not just of African American troops over prejudice and injustice, but about the movement of our nation toward a more tolerant and courageous society.

In short, this is an all-American story that should be made a greater part of our Parks system, and I believe it will enhance the Parks experience for millions of visitors, returning and newcomers, for many years to come.

I respectfully ask for the Subcommittee's support for H.R. 1022, and I thank you for the opportunity to deliver my testimony today.