

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

August 13, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1840 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

We write to follow up on concerns related to the opening and operation of national parks during a global pandemic. You refused to answer basic questions about the decision to reopen parks over the objections of surrounding communities we posed in a letter earlier this year; we now understand that the Department of the Interior (DOI) is not requiring masks or social distancing at indoor facilities operated by the National Park Service (NPS), even at units located where the surrounding state or local government has instituted a mandatory mask requirement. Leaving these important health and safety measures up to individual park units conflicts with current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for wearing face coverings in public settings in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus.<sup>1</sup>

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) classification of risk for employees puts many NPS employees in the “Medium Exposure Risk” category.<sup>2</sup>

Employee and visitor safety should be the Department of the Interior’s top priority. Unfortunately, due in large part to current DOI policy, many NPS employees have returned to work, putting them at increased risk of exposure to coronavirus when they interact with the public. The current practice of relying on passive signs to encourage mask use and social distancing is not enough. When employees and visitors cannot avoid situations that place them at high risk for contracting the coronavirus, both parties should at least be required to wear masks or other appropriate face coverings consistent with CDC guidelines. Failure to do so could facilitate the spread of coronavirus among visitors, employees’ families, and surrounding communities.

Despite NPS’s own policy to “ensure expansions of public access are considerate of State and local health guidance,” the agency is not requiring masks or enforcing social distancing at units located

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, July 16). Considerations for Wearing Cloth Face Coverings. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

<sup>2</sup> Occupational Health and Safety Administration. (n.d.). Guidance of Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19 [OSHA 3990-03 2020]. Retrieved from <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>

within states or localities with a mandatory mask requirement.<sup>3</sup> From the Independence National Historical Park in Pennsylvania, where there is a statewide order requiring face coverings in any indoor location open to the public, to the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Kentucky, where masks are required in public places, conflicting guidance between NPS-governed areas and localities that require masks threatens the safety of park employees, visitors, and those who live closest to our public lands.

Particularly in light of summer being the busiest season for park visitation, we must ensure National Park Service employees and the public are taking at least the most basic measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and that the agency adheres to CDC guidelines. Therefore, we urge you to require visitors and employees to wear masks outdoors when they cannot maintain proper social distance. When employees and visitors are in buildings, they should be required to wear masks.

When we wrote in April with questions about the reopening of national parks, the Department's response claimed our questions were too broad. Operating during the pandemic, which has only intensified since our last correspondence, continues to be complex and complicated and requires full transparency. To assist the Committee with its oversight activities and to address outstanding questions and concerns regarding basic protections for employees and the public at NPS sites, please provide answers to the following questions and all requested documentation and information as soon as possible, but no later than August 31, 2020:

- Will the Department of the Interior require masks when NPS employees and visitors in buildings and in public places cannot adhere to social distancing guidelines? If not, please provide documents sufficient to show scientific evidence that the CDC guidance regarding the use of masks or other suitable facial coverings is invalid.
- Does the Department have a plan to purchase and distribute adequate PPE to all units of the National Park System? If not, please provide the justification and rationale for this decision.
- All documentation related to how the Department of the Interior plans to ensure that agency operations comply with CDC guidelines, particularly those related to wearing face coverings in public settings, to ensure the maximum safety of NPS employees and visitors.
- All documentation outlining the rationale and guidance that informed the Department of the Interior's decision to not require masks or social distancing at units located in states or localities with a mandatory mask requirement.
- All documents and communications related to the Department of the Interior's process for deciding whether to require masks and/or social distancing in states or localities where there is a mandatory mask requirement.

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<sup>3</sup> National Park Service. (2020, May 28). National Park Service COVID-19 Adaptive Operations Recovery Plan. Retrieved from [https://inside.nps.gov/sites/default/files/document/2020-05/NPS%20COVID-19%20Adaptive%20Operations%20Recovery%20Plan\\_FINAL\\_05282020.pdf](https://inside.nps.gov/sites/default/files/document/2020-05/NPS%20COVID-19%20Adaptive%20Operations%20Recovery%20Plan_FINAL_05282020.pdf)

We ask that you take all necessary steps to ensure that National Park Service employees have the resources and guidance required for their safety and the safety of the public visitors to these sites. We stand ready to help and appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Chair  
House Committee on Natural Resources



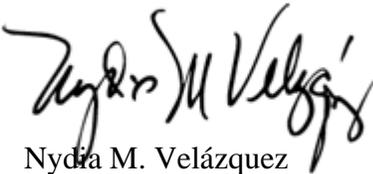
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