

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

Washington, DC 20515

March 31, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt,

We write with serious concerns regarding your decision to keep national parks and other public lands open during the coronavirus pandemic and ask that you take whatever additional actions may be needed to protect public health and slow the spread of the virus.

Over the last several days, there have been numerous reports of crowding at popular national parks and public land sites that prevented people from maintaining the social distancing called for by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). While the Department of the Interior manages a vast acreage of public lands, many of the highest visitation areas are designed to direct visitors toward some of our country's greatest natural wonders, and many of those places have recently seen unsafe crowd sizes.

Staff and visitor safety must be the number one priority for your Department, which is why we were shocked to learn of recent news reports that suggest you denied the Superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park's recent request to close the park.^{1,3} On a popular trail in the Grand Canyon, a ranger had 600 contacts with visitors in just one day, putting the health of that ranger and all of those visitors at risk. On March 30, 2020, it was confirmed that a resident of Grand Canyon Village has the area's first confirmed case of COVID-19.³ Given these grave public health risks, park management made the difficult decision to request closing the park. The Navajo Nation, which is dealing with an outbreak of coronavirus, the Hualapai Nation, and Coconino County all supported the request to close Grand Canyon National Park to protect public health throughout the region. Unfortunately, by ignoring park management and key local

¹ Repanshek, K. (2020, March 26). UPDATE 3| Interior Secretary Refuses to Let Grand Canyon National Park Close in Face Of COVID-19). National Parks Traveler. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2020/03/update-3-interior-secretary-refuses-let-grand-canyon-national-park-close-face-covid-19>

² Fears, D. & Grandoni, D. (2020, March 26). Thousands are crowding into free national park. And workers are terrified of coronavirus. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/03/26/coronavirus-national-parks/>

³ White, Kaila. (2020, March 30). First Grand Canyon resident tests positive for coronavirus; park still open. *AZ Central*. Retrieved from <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-health/2020/03/30/first-grand-canyon-area-resident-has-coronavirus-park-still-open/5092501002/>

stakeholders, it appears that you have chosen to play politics with the health and safety of the American public. We understand that closing an iconic destination like the Grand Canyon is not an easy decision, but we implore you to do everything in your power to prioritize public health and not interfere with locally informed decisions to close parks where appropriate.

As you know, impacts of the pandemic are not unique to Arizona and the Grand Canyon. In New Mexico, the All Pueblo Council of Governors has asked groups of visitors not to visit Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument because of the threat posed to the nearby Cochiti Pueblo. In Washington, DC, streets and Metro stations near the National Mall and Tidal Basin had to be closed down to stem the crowds of people seeking to view the seasonal cherry blossoms. Thousands of people are going into Zion National Park every day and many of them continue to gather at Angels Landing, one of its more popular lookouts. While we recognize that the National Park Service has closed a portion of Angels Landing trail due to crowding, the closure of entire parks in other areas has been necessitated by the fact that social distancing just isn't possible on many of our most visited public lands, despite people's best intentions.

Warnings on the National Park Service website and the closure of some park facilities have not proven sufficient to protect public health, prompting grave concerns from federal employees and the local communities nearest our public lands. Many parks are located in rural areas where an outbreak would overrun community hospitals and their staff, making it imperative that we act now to reduce risk.

At this unprecedented time in our nation's history, we must prioritize the health and safety of visitors to national parks and public lands and the staff charged with the protection of these natural resources during this crisis. We urge you to establish clear safety protocols for employees and visitors guided by directives from public health experts to prevent the spread of coronavirus on public lands, and to close parks and other public lands that are not able to meet CDC guidelines.

Sincerely,



Debra Haaland
Chair
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests,
and Public Lands



Ruben Gallego
Chair
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the
United States



Raúl M. Grijalva
Chair
House Committee on Natural Resources



Jared Huffman
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Alan Lowenthal
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Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress



A. Donald McEachin
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Diana DeGette
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Tom O'Halleran
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