

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

May 15, 2020

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

Mr. David Vela
Deputy Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt and Deputy Director Vela:

I write to express my concerns with the Department of the Interior's (DOI) planned phased reopening of national parks and other public land sites amidst the current public health crisis. At a time when the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus continues to rise, both in the United States and other countries, I urge you to exercise extreme caution with the planned phased reopening of national parks – some of our country's most popular travel destinations – and to delay reopening sites until the safety of employees, visitors, volunteers, and those who live closest to our public lands can be ensured.¹

Last week, the National Park Service began its phased reopening of national park units by reopening a number of major national parks, including Everglades National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, often cited as the nation's most visited national park unit.² Since then, there have already been reports of overcrowding and visitors entering blocked-off areas that were closed off to comply with federal social distancing guidelines.³ At Great Smoky Mountains National Park, parking lots were immediately overfilled by visitors originating from 24 different states, many without masks.⁴ Evidently, the safeguards the NPS has implemented to protect employee and visitor safety at reopened sites are wholly insufficient to protect public health.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, the Committee has expressed numerous concerns with the administration's encouragement of public land visits and efforts to reopen national parks and other

¹ Johns Hopkins University & Medicine. (2020, May 13). Coronavirus COVID-19 United States Cases Map. *Center for Systems Science and Engineering*. Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>

² Grandoni, D. (2020, May 6). The Energy 202: National parks start to reopen as agency 'worst case scenario' projects staff hospitalizations. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202-national-parks-start-to-reopen-as-agency-worst-case-scenario-projects-staff-hospitalizations/5eb1a5e88e0fa594778fbfa/>

³ Associated Press. (2020, May 10). Visitors flock to Great Smoky Mountains National Park after reopening this weekend. *Cincinnati*. Retrieved from <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/05/10/great-smoky-mountains-national-park-reopens-large-crowds/3105285001/>

⁴ Ortega, R. P. (2020, May 9). Visitors from two dozen states descend on Smoky Mountains Park on first day after reopening as officials slam crowds for not wearing masks and ignoring barriers to trek into blocked-off areas. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8304179/Visitors-flock-Smoky-Mountains-park-reopening-day.html>

public land sites in the absence of clear safeguards. Following President Donald Trump's announcement that the administration "will begin to reopen our national parks and public lands," the Committee sent a letter on April 27, 2020, requesting documentation and information detailing how DOI will determine when it is appropriate to reopen parks and other public land sites. Unfortunately, your response failed to provide any of the requested documentation and provided no information on the reopening plans.

I recognize the benefits of reopening national parks and other public land sites when appropriate. But rushing to reopen national parks prematurely and in the absence of stringent safeguards threatens public health and puts lives in jeopardy.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted our tribal and rural communities – the communities that are often the closest to our public lands. The Navajo Nation, which is surrounded by Grand Canyon National Park and other public lands, has had more confirmed cases per capita than any state in the country.⁵ On May 11, 2020, President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer of the Navajo Nation wrote you to ask that reopening plans be postponed. You seem to have ignored that request out of hand. The NPS announced its plans to reopen Grand Canyon National Park less than a week after the Navajo Nation wrote to you.⁶

Ensuring the safety of NPS employees, visitors, and gateway communities is your responsibility, and human safety must take precedence over any politically motivated decisions to reopen national park sites. It is long past time for the administration to heed calls from those elected to represent the communities that live closest to our public lands and to prioritize public health and safety above all else. It greatly concerns me that you made this decision despite the rising number of confirmed cases in Coconino County, where Grand Canyon National Park is located.

To assist the Committee with its oversight activities and to address outstanding questions and concerns regarding the administration's planned phased reopening of national parks and public land sites, please provide the following documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than May 28, 2020:

- Any documentation and information breaking down the costs, and future cost needs, for providing personal protective equipment to all DOI employees.
- Documentation and information outlining the future cost needs to address vandalism and condition assessments.
- Documentation detailing how DOI will determine when it is appropriate to reopen, or to keep open, parks and other public land sites.

⁵ Martin, R. (2020, May 13). Navajo Nation President Says COVID-19 Has Killed 103. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/13/855419230/navajo-nation-president-says-covid-19-has-killed-103>

⁶ Coconino County, Arizona. (2020, May 14). COVID-10 Information. Retrieved from <https://www.coconino.az.gov/covid19>

- A breakdown of the specific guidance and/or criteria DOI will provide to reopen closed facilities, units, and sites.
- A timeline specifying when DOI plans to begin reopening parks and other public land sites that are currently closed.
- Documentation outlining DOI's plans to consult with stakeholders – including DOI employees, scientists, and state, tribal, and local officials – to ensure that any decisions to reopen, or to keep open, parks and other public land sites reflect local conditions and prioritize public health.
- Documentation specifying the protocols and processes DOI will implement to ensure visitor safety when reopening, or deciding to keep open, parks and other public land sites.
- Documentation specifying the protocols and processes DOI will implement to ensure employee safety when reopening, or deciding to keep open, parks and other public land sites.
- Any documentation and/or information related to how DOI plans to house NPS employees, seasonal staff, trail crews, and fire crews, consistent with federal and state guidelines.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact the National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee staff at (202) 225- 6065. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva

Chair

House Committee on Natural Resources