

Testimony of Vic Fazio, Commissioner, National Parks Second Century Commission

**United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

Hearing on Building on America's Best Idea: the Next Century of the National Park System

May 25, 2010

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the recommendations of the National Parks Second Century Commission. It was a privilege to serve as part of such a talented, diverse, committed group of notable Americans, and we greatly appreciate your interest in our work and findings.

The commission made many recommendations, and took the long view. We realize that not every recommendation can be implemented immediately. Some will take years. But many, whether near- or long-term, will require a National Park System that is better funded to meet its mission. I served on the committee on funding and budget, which was ably chaired by Linda Bilmes, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. We examined a series of funding-related issues and opportunities, and I will highlight a few of those in my remarks.

First and foremost, the commission found that current funding is fundamentally inadequate to the tasks the National Park Service has before it, and to those it must engage in the future. Our national financial commitment to the parks matches neither their importance to society nor the enormous franchise they have with the American people.

At the top of the list is operational funding, which is absolutely critical to implementing a significant number of the commission's recommendations. Operational funding is essential to ensure the Park Service has the resources, personnel, and organizational capacity to meet its mission, serve the public, diversify its workforce, conduct needed scientific research, and protect park resources. Annual Park Service appropriations last year were approximately \$2.7 billion—less than one-tenth of one percent of the federal budget. The commission came to understand that such an amount cannot possibly stretch across the distance of public expectations and Park Service needs. As you know, the annual operating shortfall, while down from its peak a few years ago, still approaches \$600 million, the maintenance backlog exceeds \$9 billion, and funding to acquire inholdings from willing sellers in national parks is nowhere close to adequate.

The commission came to very much appreciate the bipartisan commitment Congress and two presidents have shown the last three years to attack the operations funding shortfall of the National Park System, and believes adequate operations funding to be fundamental to the Park Service's success in the future. The commission recommended that Congress continue that

effort and “increase funding for the National Park Service by at least \$100 million over fixed-cost inflation each year until 2016, to eliminate the current operations shortfall.”

Second, the commission believes that the Land and Water Conservation Fund has a critical role to play in the future of our parks—those that already exist and future additions. The National Park Service has not been funded adequately to purchase from willing sellers the remaining private lands that are within authorized park boundaries. On average, only half the money placed in the LWCF trust fund has actually been appropriated for its intended use. We would hope that Congress will restore the original intent that LWCF be a mandatory program, and fund it to fully meet its intended purposes.

Third, Congress and the administration should focus more on the tremendous leveraging power of the Park Service’s underfunded community assistance programs. Communities across the country and the citizens they serve already have experienced the value of those programs for conservation, preservation, and recreation. Since our fellow commissioner Jerry Rogers will focus on the various historic preservation programs, I will confine my focus to the Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program. RTCA provides invaluable technical assistance to local communities, whether they are near national parks or not, to improve quality of life, provide recreational opportunities, and conserve important community resources. RTCA is helping the community of Caldwell, Idaho, restore a nearly half-mile-long section of Indian Creek, which had been buried since the 1930s. By resurrecting the stream, the project has improved resource protection and recreation, assisting in a multi-million-dollar revitalization of downtown Caldwell. This is a low-cost, high value program that merits more attention and funding than it now receives.

The commission was very aware of the fiscal challenges that confront our nation. As such, we also focused on the need to identify new sources of revenue to make the parks everything they should be in the next century. I will focus on two: an endowment and a national campaign leading up to the 2016 centennial.

As our commission colleague, Linda Bilmes, said, “If we intend to protect the national parks in perpetuity, basic finance tells us that we must fund them in perpetuity.” In fact, the commission believes that national park system financing structures should be adjusted to genuinely reflect the understanding these places are meant to be preserved forever. At present, short-term appropriations and supplementary donations are typically related chiefly to immediate needs. Given the volatility of this type of funding, and the “hand-to-mouth” nature of the annual appropriations cycle, we recommend the creation of a tax-exempt endowment.

An endowment would provide a perpetual revenue stream for an institution with a mission in perpetuity, enabling donors to give or bequeath funds to provide for a range of purposes, including science and scholarship, education, specific Park Service projects, and public-private initiatives outside park boundaries that serve the broader mission. Philanthropic support is attracted to innovative ventures and long-term goals, so the endowment would supplement annual appropriations, which should continue to pay for core operating and infrastructure needs. The commission report goes into greater detail about how an endowment might be structured.

In addition, the commission has called for a significant campaign for Americans to contribute to and engage with our national parks leading up to, and beyond, the National Park Service centennial in 2016. Such a campaign should engage philanthropists, corporations and citizens from all walks of life. It should also engage a new generation in full stewardship of lively, sustainable national parks and the ideals on which they're built. The campaign can also give a powerful impetus to the long process of seeding the national parks endowment. That's a durable accomplishment that would truly foster national pride in a job well done.

Our commission colleague, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, observed, "There's no better route to civic understanding than visiting our national parks. They're who we are and where we've been." The commission believes the parks should be funded in a manner that befits this status, so our children, grandchildren, and society in general, reap the full benefit the parks are intended to provide.

We are privileged to be here today on behalf of the tremendous group of commissioners with whom we have been privileged to serve. On behalf of our colleagues, thank you for your commitment to our national parks, and to future generations. We offer our services to you as you continue to grapple with how best to carry out the federal government's stewardship of this unique, treasured American institution.