

Testimony of Denis P Galvin
Board of Trustees, National Parks Conservation Association,
before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
regarding the Federal government shutdown
October 16, 2013

My name is Denis P. Galvin, and I thank the committee for the opportunity to testify today as a trustee of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). NPCA, founded in 1919, now has 800,000 members and supporters and the nation's premier citizen organization that advocates on behalf of our national parks.

Most pertinent to today's hearing is the nearly 40 years I spent in the National Park Service—my final 16 in Washington as Deputy Director during the Reagan, Clinton, and Bush administrations.

The National Park Service (NPS) is charged with protecting our nation's parks and monuments for present and future generations. The fiscal challenges faced by our parks are well documented, including in-depth analyses by this committee during 2005 and 2006, during which I also had the opportunity to testify. The present government shutdown affected an agency that has lost thousands of staff in recent years, most recently due to the sequester, and has been doing its best to protect our national treasures for our grandchildren while ensuring the public can enjoy them today.

It is unfair to blame NPS for the damage that is being caused by the federal shutdown. Quite to the contrary, our parks have been forced on very short notice to engage in a difficult task unlike any they have confronted for almost two decades--shut down a system that is designed to stay open and built around facilitating access and memorable experiences for millions of visitors, including 287 million in 2012, NPS employees want to do the work they are good at doing and, like so many other government employees caught up in this shutdown, would much rather be at work, serving the public.

During my tenure NPS went through five "shutdowns." Most were a few days or hours and had minimal impact. But the long shutdown in the winter of 1995-96 was eerily similar to today's events. States and local governments lamented the closure and in one instance threatened National Guard action, although that closure occurred during a period of far less visitation to most national parks. Then, like now, it took time for an agency that was forced to furloughed thousands of staff—normally its everyday eyes and ears--to learn and analyze the types of adjustments that might be needed to its shutdown plan and to determine its legal ability to make those adjustments.

The fact that so many states have stepped forward and either developed agreements with the National Park Service or are contemplating such agreements, is a testament to the enormous economic impact of the 401 unit National Park System on many communities throughout our country—a \$30 billion per year economic generator that produces 240,000 private sector jobs. Estimates of the daily cost of keeping our national parks closed range from \$30 million to \$76 million. Every day, park concessioners have been

losing \$5 million, and every week cooperating associations within the parks are losing about \$3.5 million. And, of course, countless private businesses that depend on the parks are facing the potential for significant, potentially catastrophic financial losses. No wonder so many states are trying to stop the bleeding caused by this shutdown.

Of course, the consequences of the shutdown are not only economic. Other values are diminished as well. During the last 16 days, tens of thousands of school children have lost opportunities to learn in national parks as part of their school's history, science, or other curriculum—an opportunity they might only have once during their school year. Hundreds of couples who booked wedding plans in national parks as long ago as two years have had those plans up-ended or face having them disrupted if the shutdown lasts much longer.

These are consequences that will affect future decisions of visitors and that are heartbreaking to National Park Service employees. But the truth is, many opportunities for visitors were disappearing before the shutdown ever began, as part of a slow-motion shutdown due to declining budgets for our parks. Over the last three years, the National Park Service has been cut 13%. The budget enacted for FY 13, which reflected the sequester, cut park operations 6% despite a pre-existing annual operating shortfall of \$600 million. It cut park construction by \$31 million from FY12, at a time when the NPS backlog already exceeds \$11 billion. National Park Service had to furlough 86% of its employees (21,379 of 24,645) before the state agreements were signed, leaving the agency unable to greet and protect visitors and protect our most cherished and iconic resources.

In a government closure the national parks become the symbol for the entire government. They are an easy media target with powerful visual images and dozens of examples of unintended consequences. Yet the NPS budget is just 1/15th of one percent of the total federal budget, (In 1981 it was 1/8th of one percent). Other less media accessible functions are also closed. All the other public lands including wildlife refuges, NASA, NIH, CDC, PHS and a host of others cannot perform. They too are important to the nation.

There has been a fair bit of confusion about some of the history of the closure that resulted from the 1995/96 shutdown. For the record, the Lincoln Memorial was closed, as was the Statue of Liberty, the Gateway Arch in St Louis, and other monuments around the country. The World War II Memorial, which has been the subject of such consternation in recent weeks and cost \$200 million to build, did not exist, nor did the Martin Luther King Memorial.

Let me tell you of my experience with closures. Shutdown plans are done hastily, because you're always hoping the closure won't happen. When the closure occurs, you do your best to convey instructions to a highly decentralized organization that spans from Maine and the Virgin Islands to Alaska and Samoa. Park superintendents, almost none of whom were in their current park in 1995, must rapidly decide with their staff how to implement the closure in order to protect the parks and the public.

For some closures, like caves or historic buildings, there generally is a clear line. Decisions at the margins, however, may appear arbitrary, such as closing Skyline Drive while leaving the Blue Ridge, Natchez Trace, and George Washington Parkways open. As for DC monuments, 1995 was a very different time. It was pre-9/11. Security considerations were vastly different. Nobody had recently vandalized the Lincoln Memorial with green paint. Movable barricades did not exist in numbers remotely close to those today. The National Park Service had not been subjected to three straight years of operational cuts or the loss of thousands of staff before the shutdown occurred. Each of these factors goes into a decision to decide what to close and what to leave open.

Perhaps the worst decision of all for a park manager is who stays and who goes home. Things are not at all easy for those who stay—they work in darkened offices with no support or have to guard entrances and turn away disappointed visitors who may be there for once-in-a-lifetime adventures. Things are also bad for those who are required to go home—they can't do the job they want to do, and aren't there to help their colleagues. And, of course, many of these people live paycheck to paycheck like so many others in businesses affected by shutdown.

The national parks are often called America's "best idea." In comparison, the shutdown is one of the worst ideas. It disrupts the lives of millions of people, whether they work in a park, want to visit a park, work in a business, or are affected by other governmental services. Congress and the president need to open the government and open the parks. Give them back to America and the world. But once the parks are open, your job is only beginning. With the centennial of the National Park System fast approaching, we also ask that Congress end the slow-motion shutdown—from Acadia and Independence Hall to Manzanar and Denali—by restoring the critically needed resources parks depend on to serve the public and protect the treasures within them.

The National Park Service is not to blame for the failure of Congress to keep our government open and provide the resources needed to maintain our parks and keep them completely open. Blaming national park employees for the abysmal results of such a failure of national leadership is unconscionable. Please end the shutdown, fulfill the promise of the Constitution, and "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Do your job and please let park rangers do the one they were hired to do.