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The Coalition Report

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

Coalition Actions

Along with 32 partner organizations, the Coalition signed [a letter](#) to the Prince William, Virginia, Board of Supervisors detailing strong opposition to the three requests for rezoning for the proposed Prince William Digital Gateway corridor (see more in "Around the Parks" below).

The Coalition joined with the National Parks Conservation Association in submitting [comments](#) on the Rocky Mountain National Park day use visitor access strategy and environmental assessment. Among other things, the comment letter expressed support for providing members of Tribes an exemption from from the access plan when entering the park for spiritual or traditional practices. Additionally, the letter details support for Alternative B, timed entry reservations.

We joined with numerous organizations in [a letter](#) to U.S. Senate leadership expressing general support for the funding levels proposed in its version of the Fiscal Year 2024 Interior appropriations bill.

The Coalition issued [a press release](#) in support of the public meeting and request to expand Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument to include Molok Luyuk.

We joined with five organizations in [commenting](#) on the Bureau of Land Management's Montana-Dakotas Office 2024 Second Quarter Draft Environmental Assessment and Draft Finding of No Significant Impact. The letter made seven recommendations, including requesting the BLM defer all parcels that do not comport

with with IM 2023-007 and that the BLM track all Expressions of Interest and acreage pursuant to the guidance.

The Coalition provided extensive [comments](#) to the Bureau of Land Management Fairbanks District Office on the Ambler Road Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. The letter describes the proposed road through the southern portion of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve as one of the most destructive construction projects in a national park and highlighted statutes and court cases that prioritize conservation above other competing priorities.

National/Regional NPS Updates

A summary of news pertaining to management and oversight of the NPS, to current trends and issues affecting the National Park System and its programs, or intersecting with the parks on a more regional basis.

- *2023 NPS employee survey results* - The annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey was released, showing that 36.2% of NPS employees said that their workload was "reasonable," 36.6% were satisfied with their salary, 28.5% felt that managers make "effective changes to address challenges," and 27.8% felt that "arbitrary action, personal favoritism, and/or political coercion are not tolerated." 36% of all employees did not recommend the NPS "as a good place to work." NPS Director Chuck Sams said that the agency is making efforts at improvement, including standardizing cash performance awarding, improving housing conditions, and including 360-degree assessments for supervisors. Source: [National Parks Traveler](#)
- *OIG report of NPS conduct on January 6* - On December 18, the Office of Inspector General released a "Review of the U.S. Department of the Interior's Actions Related to January 6, 2021." In particular, the report focused on the NPS' permitting process for the Women for America First (WFAF) demonstration at the Ellipse, as well as information sharing between the NPS, the U.S. Park Police, and other law enforcement partners. The report found that the NPS complied with legal requirements, but failed to comply with internal standards around safety reviews, prohibited items, and pre-demonstration photographs. It also found that WFAF intentionally obfuscated its plans for a post-demonstration march and that the U.S. Park Police did not fail to exercise its law enforcement responsibilities both at the Ellipse and the U.S. Capitol. Source: [Department of the Interior Office of Inspector General](#)
- *NPS leads in customer service* - An evaluation conducted by the Forrester research firm showed that the National Park Service led 15 federal agencies in providing customer service. Overall, federal agencies ranked well below private sector ratings, earning an overall customer experience rating of 62% positive. Source: [FEDweek](#)

- *Sustainable government travel memo* - On December 14, the Executive Office of the President and the Office of Management and Budget published a new [memorandum](#) that requires federal employees to prioritize sustainable transportation for official travel, including minimizing business trips, prioritizing public transit, alternatives to air travel, and utilizing electric vehicles. Source: [Government Executive](#)
- *LA Times support for new national monuments* - The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board published [an opinion](#) encouraging President Joe Biden to use the Antiquities Act to designate Chuckwalla National Monument and San Gabriel Mountains National Monument in southern California. Source: *Los Angeles Times* [Editor note: *The Coalition has actively advocated for the creation of both monuments. (11/8, 9/25)*]
- *"The Worst National Park Reviews of the Year"* - *Outside* published [an article](#) by this name, highlighting bad visitor reviews of national parks on *Yelp*, *TripAdvisor*, and *Google* in 2023. Source: *Outside*
- *Book about intersection of roads and ecology* - A new book by Ben Goldfarb, *Crossings: How road ecology is shaping the future of our planet*, was recently published. The book includes examples from several national parks, including Yellowstone and Grand Teton. Ben interned at Yellowstone National Park in 2009. Source: *Mountain Journal*

Around the Parks

Reports are in alphabetical order by park/program name.

- *Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, Obed Wild and Scenic River* - On January 1, the NPS will open commercial use authorization applications for a variety of services in the two parks. They are due on February 28. Source: [Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area](#)
- *Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument* - *Alabama News Center* published [an article](#) about the ongoing development of the park, which was established seven years ago. The park has completed a master plan and is working to expand its staff. Source: *Alabama News Center*
- *Blue Ridge Parkway* - On December 19, the NPS announced that it selected America's National Parks, a part of Eastern National, to manage retail operations at Mabry Mill (milepost 176.2) for the 2024 season. The current concessioner informed the NPS that they do not want to extend or renew their contract, and a new request for proposals will be issued in mid-2024, with the intent to have the new operator in place for the 2025 season. Source: [Blue Ridge Parkway](#)

- *Canaveral National Seashore* - The park will increase entrance fees starting on January 1. Source: [Talk of Titusville](#)
- *Cape Cod National Seashore* - This winter and spring, the park, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, will continue a project to remove dead trees and shrubbery from the Duck Harbor area to promote native saltmarsh vegetation and reduce the risks of fires and mosquito breeding. Saltwater overwash events have been occurring in the area since January 2021, resulting in the death of ~120 acres of vegetation. 80 acres have been cleared thus far. The project is being funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Source: [Cape Cod National Seashore](#)
- *Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park* - In November, the park began a \$574,825 project to repair damage at Fletchers Cove caused by a flashflood in July 2019. The project will repair pipes and drainage channels, stabilize bridges, and repair roads. It is expected to be complete this month. The project was funded by NPS line-item construction funding. In Spring 2024, the park will begin a historic preservation and maintenance project on the five-mile section of the canal in Georgetown, DC. In addition to preserving historic integrity, the project will reduce the risk of flooding in Georgetown during storms and high water. The project is expected to be complete by the end of 2025. Portions of the towpath will be closed with detours during the project. Source: [Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park](#)
- *Coltsville National Historical Park* - On December 18, the forge and foundry of the old Samuel Colt firearms factory were donated to the National Park Service. The buildings will serve as a visitor center to the park. The donation was made by the developers of the complex CD Management and the tax-credit investing arm of Chevron. Both buildings require significant renovations before they will be open to the public. Source: [Fox 61](#)
- *Fort Larned National Historic Site* - *The Journal* published [an article](#) about a 800-mile high-voltage transmission line project called Grain Belt Express that will be constructed starting in 2024. Under the current plan, the line will be visible from the park, raising some concern that it will detract from the historic character of the fort. Grain Belt Express is working with the NPS on an analysis of potential visual impacts. Source: *The Journal*
- *Fort Point National Historic Site* - The park has started a project to replace a corroded chain railing with a new seawall railing that will better withstand sea weathering along 2,000 feet of Marine Drive. The old rusty chain, dating back to the 1970s, has been somewhat popular as foreground in pictures of the Golden Gate Bridge. Source: [San Francisco Chronicle](#)
- *Freedom Riders National Monument* - The park announced some changes, including the opening of the bus depot every Wednesday, availability of a park

stamp, two permanent park ranger positions, and, soon, installation of temporary exhibits and a parking space at the site of the bus burning. Source: [The Anniston Star](#)

- *Gateway Arch National Park* - The park has installed a new LED lighting system that is brighter, more efficient, and less harmful for birds. The NPS worked with Technical Productions, Inc., the Gateway Foundation, Reed Burkett Lighting Design, Elation Lighting and Electronic Theatre Controls, and "numerous other lighting companies" on the project. Source: [KSDK](#)
- *George Washington Memorial Parkway* - On December 16, an agreement was signed between the NPS and Arlington County (VA) to allow a future pedestrian bridge between Crystal City and National Airport. The county has set aside \$1.6 million in Crystal City Tax Increment Financing funds for the project, and is working to award a design contract. In addition to the bridge, enhancements, such as a new parking lot, rehabilitated boat launch, and public restrooms, are being considered. The Friends of Mount Vernon Trail have committed to \$500,000 in maintenance activities over the next five years. Interpretive signage highlighting underrepresented stories from Abingdon Plantation and Arlington House will also be installed. Construction on the bridge is expected to begin in late 2027 and last for two years. Source: [ARL Now](#)
- *Glacier National Park* - The park recently gave an award to cave expert Hans Bodenhamer for several decades of work surveying and studying caves, as well as mentoring youth in caving techniques and science. Hans was originally recruited to work for the NPS after he was arrested in the Grand Canyon for rafting without a permit and took a helicopter ride back with Ranger Butch Farabee, who was impressed by Hans' "encyclopedic knowledge" of caves in the canyon. Source: [Flathead Beacon](#)
- *Grand Canyon National Park* - Ranger Elizabeth "Betsy" Aurnou was selected for the 2023 NPS Wright Brothers National Aviation Safety Award for her work removing hazardous and historic telephone lines from the main flight corridor in the park. Source: [Grand Canyon National Park](#)
- *Grand Teton National Park* - *Buckrail* published [an article](#) about the first women to be backcountry and climbing rangers in the park, starting in the 1970s. Source: *Buckrail*
- *Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park* - On December 20, the NPS and Federal Aviation Administration completed an Air Tour Management Plan for the park. The plan authorizes 1,548 air tours per year on three specific routes, a significant reduction from the current level of 11,300 flights per year. The plan also limits tours to specific hours and days. Source: [Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park](#)

- *Historically Black Colleges and Universities Grant Program* (an NPS-administered program) - On December 15, the program announced that it opened applications for \$11 million in grants to support the preservation of historic buildings and structures on HBCU campuses. Applications are due by January 17, 2024. Source: [National Park Service Office of Communications](#)
- *Indiana Dunes National Park* - On December 18, the park opened up Commercial Use Authorization applications for guided hikes, overnight group camping, photography lessons, fitness classes, equipment rentals, guided kayaking and canoeing, and food trucks. Applications are now available online. Source: [Indiana Dunes National Park](#)
- *Indiana Dunes National Park* - On December 21, the park opened a request for expressions of interest to develop the historic Bailly Homestead. A public solicitation for a operators will take place after this phase. Expressions of interest are due by March 31, 2024. Source: [Indiana Dunes National Park](#)
- *Joshua Tree National Park* - *The Las Vegas Sun* published [an op-ed](#) by Mark Butler, former superintendent of Joshua Tree and 38-year employee of the NPS, advocating for the designation of the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument, adjacent to Joshua Tree. Source: *Las Vegas Sun*
- *Mammoth Cave National Park* - The park will increase fees for cave tours and picnic shelter reservations starting on March 1, 2024. Source: [Mammoth Cave National Park](#)
- *Manassas National Battlefield Park* - On December 13, the Prince William County (VA) supervisors voted in favor of rezoning 2,100 acres adjacent to the park for a data center complex. The park and many non-profit groups have actively fought the data center project (including the Coalition; see "Coalition Actions" above). Source: [National Parks Traveler](#)
- *Mesa Verde National Park* - *The Art Newspaper* published [an article](#) about research on the park that has utilized LiDAR and local Tribal knowledge to identify petroglyphs several hundred feet above a prehistoric Pueblo dwelling site known as Castle Rock Pueblo. One of the petroglyph panels is believed to be a prehistoric calendar. Source: *The Art Newspaper*
- *Natchez Trace Parkway* - The parkway released its [2022 Socioeconomic Research report](#), focusing on who visits the parkway and what they do during their visit. The report was conducted by a research team from Otak, Inc., RRC Associates, and the University of Montana. Source: [Natchez Trace Parkway](#)
- *National Historic Landmarks Program, National Natural Landmarks Program* (NPS-administered programs) - On December 13, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland

designated 16 new National Historic Landmarks and two new National Natural Landmarks across 15 states. Secretary Haaland also approved updated documentation for six current NHLs and the withdrawal of designation for three NHLs due to loss of historic integrity from fires and other damage. Source: [National Park Service Office of Communications](#)

- *Olympic National Park* - On December 14, the park restored both of its Hurricane Ridge webcams. The utilities that support the webcams had been damaged during the Hurricane Ridge Day Lodge fire. The project was funded by Washington's National Park Fund. Source: [Olympic National Park](#)
- *Olympic National Park* - *The Seattle Times* published [an article](#) about the challenges to maintaining the historic Kalaloch Lodge and nearby archaeological sites in the face of eroding ocean bluffs. Source: *The Seattle Times*
- *Olympic National Park* - *The Washington Post* published [an article](#) about the largest dam removal project in history, the Klamath River dams in Oregon and California. The removal of dams on the Elwha River is mentioned in the article as evidence that is informing the Klamath River restoration. [*Editor note: Olympic National Park is not explicitly named in the article, though one of the former Elwha dams was located inside the park.*] Source: *The Washington Post*
- *Ozark National Scenic Riverways* - On January 2, 2024, the park will begin a utility upgrade project at Big Spring Campground. The campground will be closed for 30 days to complete the work. The project will be executed by Blinderman Construction. Source: [Ozark National Scenic Riverways](#)
- *Petrified Forest National Park* - On December 13, the park announced that it signed a formal partnership to be a sister park with Talampaya National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Argentina. Source: [Petrified Forest National Park](#)
- *Point Reyes National Seashore* - *The Los Angeles Times* published [an article](#) about new research outlining the role of coyotes in hunting and scavenging along the California coasts. The article includes mention of wildlife cameras located at Point Reyes that were used in the research. Source: *Los Angeles Times*
- *Rocky Mountain National Park* - The National Parks Conservation Association published [an article](#) about Ranger Jill Baron, who has studied air and water quality in the park for over 40 years. The research by her and her team has shown the effects of high levels of nitrogen on aquatic habitat. Source: National Parks Conservation Association
- *Shiloh National Military Park* - On November 28, the park closed the visitor center for a major exhibit renovation project. The project will take several months and there is no estimated reopening date yet. A temporary visitor contact station and

restrooms will be available during the project. Source: [Shiloh National Military Park](#)

- *Statue of Liberty National Monument* - On December 19, the NPS announced that it selected Evelyn Hill, Inc., to be the concessioner for Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The concession includes retail, food and beverage, and "associated services." Evelyn Hill has held the concession contract since 2008. The new contract term will begin on May 1, 2024, and last 12 years. Source: [Statue of Liberty National Monument](#)
- *Yellowstone National Park* - *The Spokesman-Review/Billings Gazette* published [an article](#) about the park's 27 rustic backcountry cabins, primarily used for official park business and not open to visitors. Source: *The Spokesman-Review/Billings Gazette*
- *Yellowstone National Park* - *The Cowboy State Daily's* podcast, "The Roundup," published [an episode](#) that interviewed Superintendent Cam Sholly. The interview covers Cam's upbringing and career, as well as the challenges and opportunities in managing Yellowstone. Source: *Cowboy State Daily*
- *Yosemite National Park* - Jon Babcock, a heavy mobile equipment operator and machine shop supervisor at the park, was selected as the 2023 Barry Hance Award winner. The award is given each year to a Yosemite employee who best exemplifies positivity, team spirit, inspiration, and dedication to the park. Source: [Sierra Sun Times](#)

Personnel Changes

- *Fire and Aviation Management* - Teresa Atkinson was selected as the new management and program analyst for the NPS Division of Fire and Aviation at the National Interagency Fire Center. Teresa most recently served for 16 years as an investigative technician at the Bureau of Land Management Office of Law Enforcement and Security. She started her new role in mid-December. Source: [National Park Service Fire and Aviation Management](#)
- *Fort Monroe National Monument* - Jaci Wells was selected as the new superintendent. Jaci has over 15 years of federal government service, most recently leading the cultural resources team for the South Florida National Parks. She will begin her new role on January 28, 2024. Source: [Fort Monroe National Monument](#)
- *Glen Canyon National Recreation Area* - Nichelle Rich has been selected as the new chief of commercial services. Nichelle has almost 10 years of NPS experience, most recently on the commercial services team at Glen Canyon. Source: [Glen Canyon National Recreation Area](#)

Park People

Here we honor deceased park employees, as well as important news about Coalition Members and other former park employees or volunteers. People are listed alphabetically by last name.

Deceased

- Joyce Elizabeth Bolin, 79, passed away on December 1. Joyce was an NPS employee for many years. Source: [Legacy/Skagit Valley Herald](#)
- Margaret Mary Meagher, 87, passed away on October 4. Mary worked for the NPS for several decades, including stints at Olympic National Park (as a Student Conservation Association intern), Zion National Park, and Yellowstone National Park, working in interpretation, history, and wildlife biology. She became the first woman with a doctorate in wildlife biology in the National Park Service and was considered an expert on Yellowstone bison. Mary retired from the NPS in 1997. During her retirement from 1997 to 2008, she assisted with archaeological fieldwork in Yellowstone and recreated a number of historic photographs in the park, which are compiled in her book, *Yellowstone and the Biology of Time*. Source: [Legacy/Spokesman-Review](#)
- Paul Newendorm, 87, passed away on December 10. Paul was "a trusted volunteer" for Rocky Mountain National Park. Source: [Estes Park News](#)
- Randall "Randy" R. Pope, 91, passed away recently. He worked for the NPS for over 30 years, including seven years as superintendent at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and stints at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and Ozark National Scenic Riverways. He also was instrumental in the creation of the Friends of the Smokies. Source: [WBIR](#)
- James "Jim" Robinson Zinck, 88, passed away on July 10. Jim worked for the NPS for 39 years, including time at Crater Lake National Park, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, Montezuma Castle National Monument, Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Harpers Ferry Center, Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, and Green Springs National Historic Landmark District. Source: [Oakey's](#), Gwen Brady

Retired

- Oralía Z. Fernandez, superintendent of Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park, will retire on January 12, 2024. Oralía has 28 years of NPS service. Source: [Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park](#)

Open for Comment

Items will stay on this list until public comment has closed.

- *National Park System* - Public comment is [open through January 16](#) on a draft

Wilderness Stewardship Reference Manual governing the management of climbing activities in wilderness areas in the National Park System. The U.S. Forest Service also simultaneously [opened public comment through January 16](#) on its own climbing management directives. Source: [Missoulian, National Park Service Office of Communications](#)

- *Acadia National Park* - Public comment is [open through January 17](#) on preliminary planning concepts for a plan to allow traditional sweetgrass gathering by enrolled members of the five federally recognized Tribes in Maine. Source: [Acadia National Park](#)
- *Bryce Canyon National Park* - Public comment is [open through December 31](#) on a plan move private horse riding reservations online at *Recreation.gov*. Source: [Bryce Canyon National Park](#)
- *Dearfield Special Resource Study* - Public comment is [open through February 23](#) on a special resources study of the historic Dearfield settlement in Weld County, Colorado, to identify whether it meets criteria to be recommended as a potential NPS unit. Source: [Greeley Tribune](#)
- *Glacier National Park, Olympic National Park* - The U.S. Forest Service has [opened public comment through late January](#) on the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, a proposed nonmotorized trail from the Continental Divide to the Pacific Ocean, starting in Glacier and ending in Olympic. Source: [Montana Outdoor Radio Show](#)
- *Grand Teton National Park* - Public comment is [open through January 11](#) on a master plan for the management and use of Colter Bay. Source: [Grand Teton National Park](#)
- *Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park* - Public comment is [open through January 11](#) on a Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan for accessibility. Source: [Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park](#)
- *Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park* - The NPS and Hawai'i Electric Light Company have [opened public comment through January 18](#) on a proposal to relocate and upgrade an electrical transmission line within the park. Source: [Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park](#)
- *Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area* - Public comment is [open through January 31](#) on a plan to replace and improve houseboat docks at Keller Ferry Marina. Most of the marina was destroyed in a storm in 2017. Source: [Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area](#)
- *New River Gorge National Park and Preserve* - Public comment is [open through](#)

[January 15](#) on a proposal to demolish and remove 35 structures from the park, including 21 that are considered historic. Source: [New River Gorge National Park and Preserve](#)

- *Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore* - Public comment is [open through December 31](#) on plans to open a backcountry cabin for public reservations near Twelvemile Beach Campground and increase fees at the Au Sable Light Station. Source: [Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore](#)

Other Department of the Interior News

- *American Climate Corps* - On December 19, a seven-way Memorandum of Understanding was signed to create an American Climate Corps, which will "train the next generation of clean energy, conservation, and climate resilience workers." The federal agencies include the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, the Interior, Labor, and Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and AmeriCorps. The program will kick off with a series of virtual listening sessions about priorities for the program starting in January. Source: [Department of the Interior](#)
- *Federal court affirms wolf reintroduction* - On December 15, a federal court denied a lawsuit by the Colorado Cattlemen's Association and the Gunnison County Stockgrowers' Association that argued that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should have done a National Environmental Policy Act analysis before signing an agreement with Colorado Parks and Wildlife to reintroduce wolves in the state. The state planned to begin capturing gray wolves in Oregon as early as December 17, with releases in Colorado as early as December 18. Source: [The Colorado Sun](#)
- *State of grizzly poaching* - *The Intercept* published [a long-form article](#) about grizzly bear poaching in the U.S., and the reasons why so few cases are prosecuted under the Endangered Species Act. Source: *The Intercept*
- *"Will the tug-of-war over Utah's canyon country ever end?"* - The *Los Angeles Times* published [an op-ed](#) with this title, outlining the recalcitrance of Utah politicians to accept public lands management actions that attempt to balance extraction and motorized recreation with conservation and non-motorized recreation. Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Bears Ears National Monument, and Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni - Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument (all monuments managed by the Bureau of Land Management) are mentioned in the op-ed. Source: *Los Angeles Times*
- *Landsat initiative* - On December 20, the Department of the Interior announced the Landsat 2030 International Partnership Initiative, an effort to improve Landsat's spatial data capability and better incorporate the data into agency management actions, including those of partner governments. Source: [Department of the Interior](#)

- *DOI's outer continental shelf plan* - On December 15, the Department of the Interior released its final 2024-2029 National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program plan, which will phase down oil and gas leasing in the Gulf of Mexico and will include no new oil and gas lease sales in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Alaskan waters. Source: [Department of the Interior](#)
- *\$51 million for rivers and watersheds* - On December 19, the Department of the Interior announced awards of over \$51 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding for 18 aquatic ecosystem projects in eight states. Source: [Department of the Interior](#)
- *\$27 million for water projects in Tribal communities* - On December 19, the Department of the Interior announced \$27 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding for upgrading clean water systems and replacing failing dams in Tribal communities. Source: [Department of the Interior](#)

Congressional Actions

Reports on legislation, upcoming hearings, and new public laws of relevance to the national parks, prepared by Don Hellmann, former assistant director of legislative and congressional affairs for the National Park Service, and Chris Soller, former superintendent of Fire Island National Seashore and legislative specialist for the National Park Service.

Senate Actions

December 12 – The Committee on Energy and Natural Resources: Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining concluded a hearing to examine S. 1281, to amend the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 to provide for security of tenure for use of mining claims for ancillary activities, and S. 1742, to modify the requirements applicable to locatable minerals on public domain land, after receiving testimony from Steve Feldgus, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Land and Minerals Management, Department of the Interior; Troy Heithecker, Associate Deputy Chief, National Forest Systems, Forest Service, Department of Agriculture; Rich Haddock, Barrick Gold Corporation, Bountiful, Utah; Chris Wood, Trout Unlimited, Arlington, Virginia; and Katie Sweeney, National Mining Association, Washington, D.C.

December 13 – The Senate agreed to the conference report to accompany H.R. 2670, to authorize appropriations for Fiscal Year 2024 for military activities of the Department of Defense and for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, by a vote of 87 yeas to 13 nays. The bill now goes to the House for further action. The following provisions are of interest to the National Park Service:

- Sec. 1809 – Designates the museum located at Blytheville/Eaker Air Force Base in Blytheville, Arkansas, as a "National Cold War Center." The language of this section notes that the museum is not a unit of the National Park System.

- Sec. 2852 – Authorizes the Secretary of Defense, acting through the Director of the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation, to make a grant (including a supplemental grant) or enter into a cooperative agreement to assist the State of Arkansas to provide security services and fire protection services for approximately 21 acres located at Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas, which comprise facilities previously occupied by the Army and Navy General Hospital conveyed by quitclaim deed to the State of Arkansas pursuant to the Act of September 21, 1959.
- Sec. 2864 – Authorizes the Secretary of the Navy to acquire, by purchase or lease from the Commonwealth of Virginia, a real property interest in approximately 225 square feet of land, including ingress and egress, at Westmoreland State Park, Virginia, for the purpose of installing, operating, maintaining, and protecting equipment to support research and development activities by the Department of the Navy for national security purposes, without regard to the applicability of the Land and Water Conservation Act. The real property interest acquired by the Secretary shall terminate, and be released without cost to the Commonwealth, when the Secretary determines the real property interest is no longer required for national security purposes.
- Sec. 2885 – Designates the National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force located at 175 Bourne Avenue, Pooler, Georgia (or any successor location), as the official National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force of the United States. The language of this section notes that the museum shall not be included as a unit of the National Park System.

December 14 – The Committee on Energy and Natural Resources ordered favorably reported several bills, including the following of interest to the National Park Service:

- S. 594, to require the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to prioritize the completion of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, with an amendment in the nature of a substitute.
- S. 1254, to designate and expand wilderness areas in Olympic National Forest in the State of Washington, and to designate certain rivers in Olympic National Forest and Olympic National Park as wild and scenic rivers, with an amendment. Some of the wild and scenic rivers designated by the bill are within the boundaries of Olympic National Park.
- S. 1634, to provide for the designation of certain wilderness areas, recreation management areas, and conservation areas in the state of Colorado, with amendments. Sec. 109 of the bill removes approximately 15.5 acres of land within Rocky Mountain National Park from potential wilderness. Title IV of the bill designates the Curecanti National Recreation Area (NRA) in statute. The NRA is currently managed by the NPS under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation.

- S. 1776, to provide for the protection of and investment in certain federal land in the state of California, with an amendment in the nature of a substitute. The following provisions affect the NPS:

Title I – Redwood National and State Parks, California:

- *Section 112*, authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to undertake initiatives to restore degraded redwood forest ecosystems in Redwood National and State Parks in partnership with the State of California, local agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.
 - *Section 115*, authorizes the establishment of a visitor center in Del Norte County, California, to assist in fulfilling the purposes of Redwood National and State Parks and the Smith River National Recreation Area.
 - *Section 118*, requires the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility and suitability of establishing overnight accommodations on Federal land at the southern and northern boundaries or on land within 20 miles of the southern and northern boundaries of Redwood National and State parks in consultation with interested Federal, State, Tribal, and local entities, and private and nonprofit organizations.
 - *Section 133*, designates, among other areas, approximately 31,000 acres in Redwood National Park as potential wilderness.
 - *Section 134*, designates, among other river segments, three segments of rivers in Redwood National Park as part of the wild and scenic rivers system.
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- S. 3033, to withdraw certain federal land in the Pecos Watershed area of the state of New Mexico from mineral entry. The bill would help protect the Pecos River, a portion of which runs through Pecos National Historical Park.
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- S. 3045, to provide for the transfer of administrative jurisdiction over certain federal land in the state of California, with amendments. The bill involves a transfer of approximately 170 acres of land between the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park in the Ackerson Meadow area.

Also, the Committee announced the following subcommittee assignments for the 118th Congress:

- Subcommittee on Energy: Senators Sanders (Chair), Wyden, Heinrich, Hirono, King, Cortez Masto, Hickenlooper, Hawley, Risch, Murkowski, Hoeven, Cassidy, and Hyde-Smith.
- Subcommittee on National Parks: Senators King (Chair), Sanders, Heinrich, Hirono, Padilla, Daines, Lee, Murkowski, and Hyde-Smith.
- Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining: Senators Cortez Masto (Chair), Wyden, Heinrich, Hirono, King, Hickenlooper, Padilla, Lee, Risch, Daines, Murkowski, Cassidy, and Hawley.

- Subcommittee on Water and Power: Senators Wyden (Chair), Sanders, Cortez Masto, Hickenlooper, Padilla, Risch, Lee, Hoeven, and Cassidy.
- Senators Manchin and Barrasso are ex-officio members of all subcommittees.

December 18 – The Senate passed S. Res. 513, recognizing December 17 as "Wright Brothers Day" and commemorating the 120th anniversary of the first powered flight.

December 20 – A unanimous consent agreement was reached providing that the Senate adjourn, to then convene for pro forma sessions only, with no business being conducted on the following dates and times, and that following each pro forma session, the Senate adjourn until the next pro forma session: Friday, December 22, 2023, at 8 a.m.; Tuesday, December 26, 2023, at 9 a.m.; Friday, December 29, 2023, at 10:30 a.m.; Tuesday, January 2, 2024, at 11:45 a.m.; and that the Second Session of the 118th Congress convene on Wednesday, January 3, 2024, at 12 noon, for a pro forma session only, with no business conducted, and that following the pro forma session the Senate adjourn and convene for a pro forma session only, with no business being conducted, on Friday, January 5, 2024, at 10 a.m.; and that when the Senate adjourns on Friday, January 5, 2024, it stand adjourned until 3 p.m., on Monday, January 8, 2024.

House Actions

December 14 – The House agreed to suspend the rules and pass the conference report to accompany H.R. 2670, to authorize appropriations for Fiscal Year 2024 for military activities of the Department of Defense and for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, by a 2/3 yeas-and-nays vote of 310 yeas to 118 nays. See Senate action on December 13, above, for provisions of the bill that affect the National Park Service. The bill now goes to the President to be signed into law.

December 14 – Read a letter from the Speaker wherein he designated the period from Thursday, December 14, 2023, through Monday, January 8, 2024, as a "district work period" under section 3(z) of House Resolution 5. The House will meet in pro forma session during this period for the Christmas and New Year's holidays and no business will be transacted.

Incidents

Incidents are listed in alphabetical order by park.

Bandelier National Monument

Winter storm

The park closed from December 13-15 due to heavy snowfall. Snow removal proved especially difficult due to the icy conditions. Source: [Bandelier National Monument](#)

Big Bend National Park

Medical fatality

On December 24, a 43-year-old collapsed at the Chisos Mountain Lodge. A team of NPS staff and volunteers and lodge employees began CPR and administered an AED within minutes. A helicopter was called from Fort Stockton, Texas, to provide emergency transport. Efforts to resuscitate the patient were unsuccessful. Source: [Big Bend National Park](#)

Blue Ridge Parkway Sled Hill closed

On December 13, the NPS closed the area known as "Sled Hill" near milepost 294.5 at the intersection of Shulls Mill Road and the Blue Ridge Parkway to all winter activities. They also closed parking along the nearby administrative access road and portions of Shulls Mill Road that are within the park boundaries. The area had become popular for sledding, tubing, skiing, and snowboarding, but it was not designed for high levels of use. Due to unsafe traffic conditions, the park decided to close it to protect visitor safety. Fencing and signage will be installed. The park may issue citations for those not in compliance. Source: [Blue Ridge Parkway](#)

Bryce Canyon National Park Rockfall

On December 8, about 4,000 pounds of rock came loose off a canyon wall, leaving rocks and small boulders across the lower switchbacks of the Navajo Loop Trail on the Two Bridges side. It took two days to clear the trail. Some retaining walls are still damaged and will be repaired in the spring. Source: [Sacramento Bee](#)

Cape Hatteras National Seashore Boat runs aground

On November 5, a 30-foot sailboat ran aground about one mile south of the Basnight Bridge on Pea Island (a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service managed area adjacent to the park). Personnel from the NPS, Chicamacomico Banks Fire and Rescue, U.S. Coast Guard Station Oregon Inlet, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service responded. No injuries occurred in the incident. The removal took several days of efforts, including cutting a temporary breach in the dune line to move it closer to N.C. Highway 12. The Coast Guard and USFWS coordinated with the owner in the removal and cleanup of hazardous materials. The removal was completed on December 15. Source: [Island Free Press](#)

Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, Wright Brothers National Memorial Severe weather

On December 17, the three parks announced they would have a delayed 12 p.m. opening

on December 18 due to forecasted strong winds and heavy rainfall due to "a strong coastal low-pressure system." Cape Hatteras sustained "serious ocean overwash flooding," including a breach of the dunes on Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands. N.C. 12 remained closed until 4 p.m. on December 18 between Hatteras Village and Frisco. The north end of Ocracoke Island remained closed until the following day to clear sand and assess damage. Source: [Cape Hatteras National Seashore, The Virginian-Pilot](#)

Cedar Breaks National Monument or Zion National Park? *[Editor note: The article does not actually specify which park the equipment was stolen from; Cedar Breaks and Zion are the two closest units to the individuals' home.]*

On December 7, an NPS law enforcement officer called the Iron County (UT) Sheriff's Office to report that an individual in Cedar City, Utah, had listed a telescope, harmonic drive mount, tripod, extension tube, eyepieces, and other related items for sale on eBay. The items, worth more than \$6,000, were believed to be items stolen from the NPS, based on notes written on the equipment. An Iron County deputy made contact with two individuals, aged 41 and 31, the latter of whom had listed the items. After questioning them, the individuals were placed under arrest and taken into custody. All of the items were found inside the 31-year-old's vehicle. Both individuals have been charged with a single count of theft of value over \$5,000, a second-degree felony. Source: [St. George News](#)

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park **Wall instability**

The park found that a historic wall along the Harpers Ferry Road between locks 33 and 34 (mile marker 61.5) showed significant signs of instability and stone loss in dry-laid stone surfaces. The road segment between Hoffmaster Road and the school bus turnaround on Sandy Hook Road was temporarily closed. On December 19, the road was reopened, with an ongoing construction zone to finish the stone façade, restore the canal, and install guardrails. The project is expected to be complete this winter. Source: [Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park](#)

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area **Missing person found in park**

On December 12, the vehicle of a 22-year-old who had been reported missing from Rochester Institute of Technology since November 20 was found at a trailhead for the Appalachian Trail within the park. A search and rescue effort was initiated the following day. Later that day, the individual turned themselves in at a police station in Palmerton, Pennsylvania, saying that they believed they were the subject of a missing persons report. A parent of the individual stated publicly that the individual's reason for disappearing for three weeks were "deeply personal." Source: [People, mLive](#)

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area

Heavy storm

On December 18, the park closed several roads and facilities due to a heavy storm that caused falling trees and limbs, high water, and roadway flooding. The Delaware River and all access points were also closed to all users. Source: [Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area](#)

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area

Hit-and-run damages bridge

Some time between the last week of November and first week of December, a vehicle hit the Main Street bridge in Walpack Center. A bridge inspection by the Federal Highway Administration on December 7 found bent and broken steel, at least one crack in the bridge foundation, and a 15-degree "rotation" of a long beam that connects the bridge decking to the support structure. The bridge is now closed. The NPS is waiting on a detailed damage report, along with repair recommendations, and a cost estimate. Until those are in hand, there is no estimated reopening date. The incident is under investigation by the NPS. Source: [Pocono Record](#)

Lincoln Memorial

Vandalism

On the morning of December 20, the area between the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial was found to have been painted with red graffiti reading, "Land Back!!" and "Free Palestine." The area was cordoned off and NPS staff are working to remove the paint. The process "may take multiple treatments over several days to remove it all." U.S. Park Police are reviewing security camera video and looking for any information the public can provide. Source: [NBC Washington](#)

Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens

Illegal emissions station

The District of Columbia recently installed a self-service car emissions testing site in Kenilworth Park. The NPS was not aware of the kiosk, which was approved by the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation without NPS approval or an issued permit. The NPS notified them that they lacked the authority to approve the installation. The agreement between the NPS and the District of Columbia specifies that federal parkland within D.C. can only be used for public recreational purposes. The kiosk currently remains in Kenilworth Park and will remain unused. The Department of Parks and Recreation is looking at alternative non-park locations in the area to reinstall the equipment. Source: [WTOP](#)

Montezuma Castle National Monument

Vandalism increase

The park has experienced an increase of vandalism on several of its Arizona sycamore trees. In the past, the park has utilized signage and volunteers to deter vandalism, but vandalism remained frequent. In response, the park wrapped six of its trees in burlap, a fabric that is difficult to cut and does not risk the health of the trees. Source: [Cronkite News](#)

Olympic National Park Landslide

On December 14, the park announced that a landslide damaged and covered parts of the Spruce Railroad Trail near the Daley-Rankin Tunnel. The tunnel portal structure and bridge are also damaged. The trail is closed until further notice for debris removal, assessment, and repairs. Source: [Olympic National Park](#)

Valles Caldera National Preserve Cattle trespass

The NPS recently sent out 23 letters to ranchers were were identified as owners of cattle that have trespassed into the park. The park has stated that in 2024 they will contract for wrangler services to round up trespass livestock. The park is also working with the U.S. Forest Service to construct new fencing, including a pilot of a "virtual fence system." The actions come after several nonprofits threatened to sue the NPS for not effectively preventing trespass. Source: [National Parks Traveler](#)

Follow-ups on Previously Reported Incidents

- *Death Valley National Park* - On December 12, the NPS announced the reopening of 60 miles of backcountry roads in the southern end of the park. On December 23, the park reopened another 95 miles of roads, including the North Highway, Ubehebe Crater Road, Racetrack Road, and lower end of Titus Canyon Road. They have been closed due to damage sustained in record floods in August due to Tropical Storm/Hurricane Hilary. Source: Death Valley National Park ([12/12](#), [12/21](#))
- *U.S. Park Police* - On December 18, the U.S. Park Police released body camera footage from the officer-involved shooting on November 22 near 12th Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW in Washington, D.C. (see [11/29/23 Coalition Report](#)). The incident is still under investigation. Source: [U.S. Park Police](#)

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If you see something that might be of interest to Coalition members, send it to report@protectnps.org.

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The Coalition is a non-profit organization of past and current NPS employees and their allies that "studies, educates, speaks, and acts for the preservation and protection of the National Park System and mission-related programs of the National Park Service."

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