National Parks Conservation Association®
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

Testimony of Thomas C. Kiernan, President

RE: Economic Recovery: Infrastructure investing

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Good morning, Chairman Oberstar, Ranking Member Mica, and Members of the Committee. I am Tom Kiernan, President, of the National Parks Conservation Association. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on the important issue of economic recovery.

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has been the leading voice of the American people on behalf of our national parks. Our mission is to protect and enhance America's National Park System for current and future generations. On behalf of our more than 340,000 members, we urge the Committee to include restoration of national park transportation infrastructure in its economic recovery plan.

Mr. Chairman and Mr. Mica, our national parks are home to some of the nation's most iconic and sacred landscapes, monuments, and historic sites. They are among the most recognizable places in the world. The parks provide a mirror of the soul of America, and are the physical embodiment of the collective experience and spirit we value as Americans. More than 270 million visits are made to national parks each year by Americans and visitors from all over the world seeking to enjoy the visual grandeur, to learn about our cultural heritage and for spiritual renewal.

Although it is not their primary purpose, our national parks play a significant role in the economies of many communities. As Congress develops an economic recovery program for our nation, investments to improve our national parks can be an important part of the effort that benefits unique places in our country and their mostly rural communities nearby. As much as $440 million worth of road projects in our national parks are ready to go to construction, and can rapidly produce as many as 7,000 jobs while also renewing our national heritage and helping to revitalize our national parks for our children and grandchildren.

To enable visitors to experience these national treasures without unduly imposing adverse impacts on the natural, cultural, historical, and archeological resources inside the parks, the people of the United States have made very substantial investments in park infrastructure. Those investments have occurred over many years, but have been meager in recent years. Two times in our history, America made substantial investments in our national parks. Both were at times when our nation was investing in new infrastructure and jobs—one in a time of national economic crisis and the other during strong economic times.

The first occurred during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first 100 days in office, when he initiated the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps with the goal of bringing our infrastructure into the 20th century, creating jobs, and reforesting many parts of our country.

The WPA provided needed jobs to millions of Americans during the Great Depression, and provided access to many magnificent national parks via newly created road and highway systems. World-famous park roads such as the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park, Montana and Skyline Drive in Shenandoah Park, Virginia were only two of the important park transportation projects completed by the WPA.

The second period of investment occurred during the economic boom that followed the Second World War, at a time when automobile ownership and tourist travel surged. It was apparent that national park infrastructure again required enhancement and investment to meet future needs. "Mission 66" was initiated as a ten-year National Park Service program intended to expand visitor services by the 50th anniversary of the Park Service in 1966. The program focused on infrastructure projects such as roads, utilities, and visitor services. Through an investment of more than $7 billion in today's dollars, the Mission 66 program transformed the national park system into one of the most popular vacation destinations for both American families and foreign tourists.

It is more than half a century since those last, significant investments were begun, and the lack of sufficient reinvestment since that time is evident from examining the condition of park roads today. The lack of investment, along with the popularity of the national parks, unfortunately has placed tremendous strains on national park infrastructure. For example, in Redwoods National Park one of the original segments of Highway 101 has not had its asphalt replaced since the 1960s. It is among the 53% of national park roads that are in poor condition. The road is in a constant state of disrepair, and is a safety hazard to vehicles and bicycles utilizing the road. The condition of the road is so poor that normal maintenance methods are no longer effective without complete rehabilitation. The road parallels Richardson Creek which provides habitat for Coho salmon, a federally listed species, and is a tributary to the Klamath River, an important salmon fishery. Numerous deteriorated galvanized culverts that are well beyond their serviceable life span drain large runoff flows through very large road fill areas. Failure of these culverts would result in significant sedimentation of Richardson Creek and the Klamath River, and would likely have an adverse impact on the native salmon. Fortunately, the Park Service does have a project to rehabilitate the Redwoods road that is ready to go. The project has received environmental clearance and all it needs is funding. The project would not only benefit the park, but would provide jobs to the surrounding Del Norte County which is one of the poorest in California.

The dismal condition of national park transportation infrastructure is in large part due to decades of insufficient funding. The National Park Service has documented a total transportation investment need of more than $5 billion, comprised of $4.7 billion for roads, $220 million for bridges, and $508 million for front country trails that connect transportation nodes. The silver lining is, of course, that we now have an opportunity to begin reinvesting in critical park infrastructure in a way that puts Americans to work in unnerving economic times while meeting our stewardship responsibilities to our children.

NPCA understands that the National Park Service has more than $270 million in 18 transportation infrastructure improvement projects that are ready to go to construction. When ready-to-go road projects that do not receive FLHP funding are included, the system-wide estimate exceeds $440 million. All these projects have obtained environmental clearance and can be contracted out within 180 days.

The National Park Service, working in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, has achieved extremely high rates of obligating federal funds authorized for transportation projects. Projects in the Park Roads and Parkways programs have an astounding first-year obligation rate of 98 percent. Other park road projects have a first-year obligation rate of 80 percent. These are exceptional spend-out rates when compared to the much larger federal highway apportionment programs, which have an overall first-year obligation rate of approximately 25 percent.

Mr. Chairman and Mr. Mica, the more than $440 million total for transportation projects in our national parks constitutes a very small slice of the overall economic recovery program currently under

discussion by this Committee. Yet, as with the WPA and Mission 66, it will provide substantial and long-lasting benefits to our national parks and their visitors. Outdated and deteriorated transportation infrastructure cannot efficiently and safely accommodate the visitors to our national parks.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the desperate state of national park infrastructure and of the importance of park roads to local communities is the Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier Park, Montana. Ascending over the continental divide at Logan Pass, the Going-to-the-Sun Road is rated as one of the ten best scenic drives in America. As such, it is a significant attraction generating over one and a half million visits per year making it an economic anchor for the tourism industry in the northwest portion of Montana. Yet, 75 years of rockslides and avalanches, severe weather, heavy traffic, and inadequate maintenance have left the road in urgent need of repair. Reconstruction began in 2007, but the funding has not kept pace with the project. More than $20 million in work is ready to begin if funding could be made available. There are many such examples of ongoing road work that could be accelerated for the benefit of both park visitors and the local economy.

In some instances, the project being proposed is not to replace deteriorating infrastructure, but instead to reduce infrastructure's impact upon irreplaceable natural resources and systems. For example, the Tamiami Trail project in Florida will raise a key section of the roadway to allow more water to flow from Lake Okeechobee through Everglades National Park to Florida Bay to improve ecosystem function, reduce harmful discharges to northern estuaries and increase water flow to water-starved areas. Unemployment in South Florida has risen dramatically with this economic downturn in particular because of the reduction in construction jobs. For a modest investment, this two-to three year project could produce dividends that are truly immeasurable both for the local economy and the environment.

As already noted, investment in park transportation infrastructure will bring immediate benefits to local communities and the national economy. Transportation projects will first create high-paying construction jobs that support local families. Using a standard public lands construction impact assessment model, as many as 7,000 jobs could be created through these projects. The secondary effect of these jobs upon the communities surrounding the parks—many of them in rural areas—would increase the benefit many times over as the income of these families is pumped back into the local economy. NPCA recently commissioned a study that found that every federal dollar invested in our national parks generates at least four dollars in direct economic benefit to state and local economies, with significant additional indirect benefits. This study was conservative and the true benefit for these projects is probably closer to the construction industry standard of 6 to 1.

Better access to our national parks encourages visits. International visitors are bringing their money to our country, which helps our economic growth and balance of trade; domestic visitors are keeping their vacation dollars at home by not vacationing overseas. In 2005, visitors spent $10.4 billion within the national parks and gateway communities. Such spending supported more than 50,000 jobs in the lodging and restaurant sectors and more than 25,000 jobs in retail trade and entertainment. It generated $5.6 billion in personal income and 246,000 jobs in local communities, most of which are in rural areas where jobs are not plentiful.

Mr. Chairman and Mr. Mica, you have a tremendous opportunity to make a desperately needed investment in our national parks while also helping foster economic recovery for our nation. Americans love our national parks, and this kind of modest investment in them as part of an economic recovery package will have outsized benefits. By funding ready-to-go projects in America's favorite places, the Committee can both foster the creation of good, needed jobs, and renew the national inheritance we have a collective responsibility to pass to our children in at least as good as condition as we received it. An investment in our national parks is both an investment in today and in our future. This would be a welcome first step in reinvesting in road infrastructure in our national parks, while also providing needed employment opportunities in rural and urban areas across the country.

This concludes my testimony and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.