

STATEMENT OF A. DURAND JONES, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, UNITED STATES SENATE, CONCERNING S. 2543, TO PROMOTE AND ENHANCE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION EFFORTS AND TO ESTABLISH A PROGRAM OF NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS IN THE UNITED STATES, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

June 24, 2004

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, it is my pleasure to appear before you today to testify on behalf of the Department of the Interior on S. 2543, the National Heritage Partnership Act. The Department strongly supports this bill, but has a few concerns about some of the provisions.

The Department strongly supports legislation to establish a national heritage areas program. We would like to thank Chairman Thomas for his leadership over the last year in evaluating programmatic issues, identifying areas for legislative action, and introducing this bill based on the Administration's legislative proposal. This legislation was developed through a yearlong process of Congressional oversight hearings, outside evaluations of the program (such as the March 2004 report by the General Accounting Office) and meetings among many of the groups interested in this issue.

S. 2543 provides a much-needed framework for evaluating proposed national heritage area designations, offers guidelines for successful planning, clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all parties, and standardizes timeframes and funding for designated areas.

The Department supports the national heritage areas approach to resource conservation through partnerships with communities. National heritage areas are intended to preserve nationally important natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources through the creation of partnerships among Federal, State and local entities. National heritage areas are locally driven, initiated and managed by the people who live there and do not impose Federal zoning, land use controls nor do they require land acquisition. At its best, the collaborative approach of this program embodies Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton's "Four Cs" – Communication, Consultation and Cooperation, all in the service of Conservation.

S. 2543 supports a conservation strategy that recognizes that the people who live in a heritage area are uniquely qualified to preserve it. Being designated as a national heritage area can benefit visitors, community residents, existing National Park units located in the area, and other Federal lands by expanding the opportunity to interpret and protect resources over a larger landscape and by telling our shared national story.

There are three provisions in S. 2543 that we wish to discuss in more detail and to offer suggestions for improvements.

Criteria for Evaluation

The standards for evaluating areas proposed for national designation are an essential element in establishing a national heritage areas program. While many places in this

nation have special meaning to the people that live there, for many places designation as a State or local heritage area may be most appropriate. The National Park Service should be the lead partner only when the resources within a proposed heritage area are of national importance.

The Department has some concerns about the use of the term “national significance” and the definition provided in S. 2543. We recommend replacing the term “national significance” with the term “national importance” to avoid confusion. The National Park Service specifically uses the term “national significance” in suitability and feasibility studies for new National Park System units. For this reason, the term “national importance” has been informally used by the National Park Service to describe the assessment of national heritage area resources.

In addition, having a concise, appropriate, and practical definition for “national significance” or “national importance” is critical. We would suggest a revised definition as applied in practice to existing and proposed national heritage areas:

The term “National Importance” is ascribed to a proposed heritage area that illustrates major historic, cultural, natural or social themes important to the history of the United States and contains resources that are outstanding examples of natural and cultural features that contribute to the theme, and which possess a high degree of integrity, and are compatible with continued community development, public enjoyment, and use.

Suitability/Feasibility Study

The Department believes that a study should be required for every proposed national heritage area and the study should be evaluated against legislatively established criteria before designation. S. 2543 requires that such a study be prepared that demonstrates evidence of place-based resources that tell a nationally significant story, which has the support and involvement of the local community. This requirement has been field-tested and has been shown to increase the future success of the heritage area.

The Department recommends a modification to the terminology used for studies. In order to be consistent with terminology used in past study and designation bills for national heritage areas, we recommend that the studies be called “feasibility studies” instead of “suitability/feasibility studies.” This would also lessen any confusion with studies for new units of the National Park System that are called suitability and feasibility studies. We recommend that this change in terminology be used throughout the bill when referring to these studies.

Funding and Timeframes

When the first national heritage corridors were designated twenty years ago, a Federal commission provided management for the areas and the National Park Service provided most of the staff. The national heritage corridor or area was conceived as a less expensive alternative to the acquisition and operation costs of creating a new unit of the National Park System. These areas were originally authorized for five years with a five-year extension; over time, the corridors have been reauthorized for additional periods.

For the 18 national heritage areas established after 1995, the National Park Service encouraged management with greater involvement by local entities as a more cost-effective use of Federal resources. Most of these newer areas are managed by a non-profit entity or a State government and include a funding formula of not more than \$10 million Federal dollars over a fifteen-year period. Our legislative proposal recommends codifying this approach and for the first time requires that a business plan be developed as part of the management planning for proposed new areas. This would ensure that from the beginning, national heritage areas are working towards and have an established plan for self-sufficiency. So far, no existing area has “graduated” from the program, even after 20 years and in some cases, and nearly \$100 million invested overall. For this reason, we recognize the need to work with existing areas to assist them in a transition strategy as they reach the end of their funding authorization. As areas become self-sufficient, available resources could be reallocated to newly designated areas or other priorities.

The Department is concerned with the new provision in section 9 of S. 2543 that caps the heritage areas program at \$15 million per year. The Administration did not propose a cap on the program because we believe it is more appropriate to cap the amount of appropriations each area is authorized to receive, and to limit the authorized period for appropriations. Currently, there are 15 new national heritage areas pending for designation in Congress. In addition, there are 24 designated national heritage areas, many of which are authorized to receive appropriations of \$1 million per year. However,

we would expect to allocate funding among these areas within the levels of funds appropriated, which might require providing less than the individual authorized ceilings in some instances.

Conclusion

Recent studies and our own experiences have shown that the national heritage area approach links people and place, nature and culture, and the present with the past. National heritage areas capitalize on the unique role local communities play in preserving their heritage and telling their stories. S. 2543 respects these principles. It assigns the appropriate roles and responsibilities to the key partners that must work together to make the program successful. It also recognizes the need to target our assistance to those areas where there is a national interest and where the local partners meet established criteria for success. We look forward to working with the committee to enact this important legislation.

This concludes my prepared remarks and I will be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.