

STATEMENT OF VICTOR KNOX, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 782, TO DIRECT THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO ESTABLISH A BISON MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK.

June 10, 2015

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 782, a bill to direct the Secretary of the Interior to establish a bison management plan for Grand Canyon National Park.

The Department opposes S. 782 because it would disrupt an ongoing planning effort for managing bison at Grand Canyon National Park, and may cause confusion about the National Park Service's existing authorities to manage wildlife populations through a variety of means, including the use of skilled volunteers.

S. 782 would direct the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to publish a bison management plan for Grand Canyon National Park (park) no later than 180 days after the enactment of this legislation. The bill would require the plan to include reduction, through humane lethal culling by skilled public volunteers and by other nonlethal means, of the population of bison in the park that the Secretary determines are detrimental to the use of the park. The bill provides that notwithstanding the Act of March 2, 1929 (16 U.S.C. 198c), which is applicable only to Rocky Mountain National Park, or any other provision of law, a skilled public volunteer may remove a full bison harvested from the park. The bill also requires the Secretary to coordinate with the Arizona Game and Fish Commission regarding the development and implementation of the management plan, and that the Secretary comply with all applicable Federal environmental laws (including regulations), including the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). And, the bill clarifies that nothing in the Act applies to the taking of wildlife in the park for any purpose other than the implementation of the management plan.

The National Park Service (NPS) has several tools available for directly managing ungulates to meet resource management objectives. These tools include both lethal and non-lethal methods for removing ungulates when the NPS determines that population numbers are too high. Under existing authorities, lethal removal of ungulates can be accomplished by using National Park Service employees, contractors, or skilled volunteers, or a combination of the above. Public hunting can also be used in parks where Congress has expressly authorized it, although hunting is not authorized at Grand Canyon National Park and S. 782 does not propose to do so. The appropriate means of culling is selected based the type of park unit, location, resource issue, conditions at the park, funding, public input, logistics and other concerns. For these reasons, the NPS has not established one method as preferred over any of the others,

and analyzes the full suite of tools available for each situation. The preferred action is selected through a planning process that is accompanied by a NEPA review of reasonable and available alternatives.

The NPS has typically used professional sharp shooters to cull whitetail deer in parks in the eastern United States, including at Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C., and Catoctin Mountain Park in Maryland. Professional sharp shooters were also used at Channel Island National Park in California to cull elk on Santa Rosa Island. In other cases, including Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado and Theodore Roosevelt National Park in South Dakota, skilled volunteers have been used to cull elk.

With regard to Grand Canyon National Park, the NPS is currently in the process of developing the alternatives for the Grand Canyon Bison Management Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). We expect to have the DEIS out for public review and comment in the winter of 2016. As part of the alternatives development process with our cooperating agencies, including Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), we are considering lethal removal, or "culling", of bison as an option for reducing bison density in the park. The use of skilled volunteers in the culling operation would be part of the analysis. If the final plan includes the use of skilled volunteers in a culling operation, we would collaborate with AGFD on implementation including the requirements and protocols for selecting volunteers, and would follow applicable federal law and regulation with regard to disposition of carcasses. S. 782 would disrupt this planning effort.

Further, although S. 782 requires the Secretary to comply with NEPA in developing the bison management plan, the legislation is contrary to NEPA to several ways. For example, by directing the Secretary to put into place a plan to reduce bison using skilled volunteers, the bill appears to circumvent the NEPA process by predetermining a specific outcome or alternative. This approach is counter to NEPA, which requires Federal land managers to consider a range of reasonable alternatives, including no action, and to provide opportunities for public engagement during the NEPA process. Additionally, attempting to complete a plan in 180 days as proposed in the legislation also runs counter to NEPA, and our efforts to work collaboratively with our partners and neighbors, as it complicates our ability to adequately involve the public, tribes, other stakeholders, and cooperating agencies, including the AGFD. Finally, the Department is also concerned that by attempting to provide this duplicative authority to use skilled volunteers in culling operations, S. 782 may cause confusion about the NPS's existing authority to carry out culling operations using skilled volunteers. While the NPS's authority to manage ungulate populations through lethal reduction has been upheld in court, S. 782 seems to call that authority into question, which could cause unnecessary confusion and be counterproductive to wildlife management efforts across the National Park System.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee may have.