

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 16, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We write to express our deep concern over the National Park Service’s “modernization of national park access” in 2026, announced on November 25, 2025.¹ This so-called modernization includes several alarming partisan, polarizing initiatives that have no place within our nation’s public lands, which are meant for all people to visit and enjoy.

Among the announced changes is a decision to remove Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth from the list of fee-free days—days intended for celebration and increased affordability and access to our National Parks. At the same time, President Trump’s birthday will be added as a fee-free day. Not only does this send the deeply troubling message that these days of profound historical importance in the struggle for civil rights are not worth honoring, but it also further promotes the President’s agenda of self-celebration.

We as a country have sought to preserve and tell the story of our history, including through the National Park Service, which operates 20 national park treasures dedicated to the history of the civil rights movement and partners with dozens of other affiliated properties connected to the National Park Service through the African American Civil Rights Network.

This so-called modernization also includes the redesign of the America the Beautiful annual passes by replacing images depicting our nation’s public lands with photos of President Trump. This change turns the America the Beautiful pass—a program intended to promote access and affordability—into a vehicle for more self-celebration and self-aggrandizing. While the images on these passes are typically replaced every year, as outlined in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, the selection process is required by law to occur through a public competition, not a unilateral administrative decision.² As such, the legality of this change is questionable at best and already the subject of litigation.

National parks are national treasures and exist as spaces where people, regardless of background and political affiliation, can come together and enjoy the outdoors. These changes do nothing to modernize how people visit national parks and are instead a thinly veiled attempt to use our

¹ National Park Service, *Department of the Interior Announces Modernized, More Affordable National Park Access* (November 25, 2025), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/department-of-the-interior-announces-modernized-more-affordable-national-park-access.htm>.

² 16 U.S. Code § 6804(a)(2).

nation's most iconic landscapes to further the self-promotion of President Trump and disparage our shared history. In light of these alarming changes, we request that you provide full and complete responses to the following questions no later than January 30, 2026:

1. Provide the Agency's reasoning for removing both Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday and Juneteenth as fee-free days.
2. The National Park Service has traditionally celebrated both Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birthday and Juneteenth through ranger-led programs, interpretive talks, performances, community gatherings, and volunteer service opportunities. Will the National Park Service continue each of these traditions, and if not, what specifically will the National Park Service cancel in 2026?
3. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (16 U.S. Code § 6804(a)(2)) requires an annual, open public competition for determining the recreation park pass designs and should be "used as a means to educate the American people about Federal recreational lands and waters."³ In practice, this competition has been held by the National Park Foundation through their Share the Experience Photo Contest. While a competition was held for the 2026 passes, the winning image was relegated to the new, more expensive Nonresident Annual Pass, rather than the customary general Annual Pass. Please describe what process was used to determine the 2026 recreation pass designs, including those specifically for the general Resident Annual Pass depicting George Washington and President Trump and the Military Annual Pass depicting President Trump.
 - a. By what date does the administration plan to remedy this violation of federal law?
4. Will U.S. residents purchasing an America the Beautiful Annual Pass be able to choose an alternative design that does not depict President Trump?
 - a. Assuming some people will decide to forgo purchasing an Annual Pass if an alternative is unavailable, has the administration considered how this may reduce revenue and park visitation?

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related
Agencies
United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations

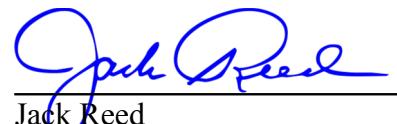


Alex Padilla
United States Senator

³ 16 U.S. Code § 6804(a)(2).



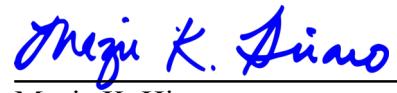
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



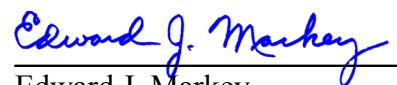
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
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