

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS CONCERNING H.R. 685, A BILL TO REQUIRE A STUDY OF THE FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE UNITED STATES CIVIL RIGHTS TRAIL SYSTEM.

July 8, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 685, a bill to require a study of the feasibility of establishing the United States Civil Rights Trail System.

The Department supports the intent of H.R. 685, which is to recognize the historically significant people, events and locations related to the struggles for civil rights, but recommends that the bill be amended in its entirety to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study that would provide Congress with an analysis of the opportunities for preservation and interpretation of specific sites related to the civil rights movement in the United States. We would be pleased to work with the committee to develop appropriate language.

H.R. 685 as introduced authorizes the Archivist of the United States, in consultation with the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture, to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of establishing the United States Civil Rights Trail System. The bill also directs the Secretary of the Interior to establish and maintain trails marking the location of historical events related to the struggles for civil rights based on racial equality, and to establish a trail in each state where significant civil rights events occurred and is required to establish six of these trails as soon as practicable after the date of enactment of the bill. However, the bill does not provide

the criteria for determining if a new civil rights trail system would be the appropriate way to preserve and interpret specific sites.

The struggle for civil rights has been a hallmark in the development of the United States from its earliest fight for independence from Britain during the 1770's through the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act guaranteeing all Americans the right to vote and prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The civil rights movement leading up to the passage of the Act was filled with violent confrontations that challenged the very foundation of our country, yet it also represented the highest aspirations of its citizens.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the most comprehensive civil rights legislation in the history of the United States and its provisions serve as major themes of the civil-rights story both before and after the Act's passage. The Department recognizes that events, places, and individuals important in the civil rights story should be celebrated and commemorated in a way that helps the public understand and appreciate the story of the civil rights movements of several minority groups in our nation's history. Many civil rights-related sites have been identified and are currently recognized within the National Park System, the National Trails System, and as National Historic Landmarks, such as ones associated with prominent individuals such as Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King, Jr. and with well-known events such as the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School and the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery Voting Rights March. However, a number of civil rights-related sites have not been recognized and some stories are underrepresented such as ones associated with the struggle for rights for American Indians, Hispanic people, and gays and lesbians.

In 1999, Congress authorized the Secretary to conduct a theme study related to civil-rights sites on a multi-state level. The National Park Service, in partnership with the Organization of American Historians, prepared the civil rights framework study to assist the National Park Service in identifying and prioritizing those areas of history significant in illustrating the civil rights story. The study, *Civil Rights In America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites*, was transmitted to Congress on June 2, 2009.

This theme study identifies broad themes within the civil rights story, as well as the events, persons, and places that represent those themes, and assessed the degree to which related sites are represented and recognized. However, it does not assess the feasibility or suitability of inclusion of particular sites into the National Trails System, the National Park System, or as National Historic Landmarks. If authorized to conduct a special resource study, the National Park Service will be able use this theme study to assess which themes and minority groups need further study to identify and to evaluate nationally significant sites.

The theme study also recommended that the National Park Service complete four National Historic Landmark theme studies to recognize, promote, and protect civil-rights-related sites and their relationship to the civil rights story's chronology, historic themes, and how various minorities are represented. National Historic Landmark theme studies are an effective way of assessing whether or not places are nationally significant in American history. They provide a historic context within which to evaluate properties, and identify places that should be studied for national designation. A thematic framework for the civil rights history would be based on the voting rights, public accommodations, equal employment, and equal education provisions of the

civil rights acts of the 1960's. These studies would also identify which stories related to the civil rights movement are underrepresented. For example, the fight for self-determination for American Indians during the 1960's and 1970's, including the impact on Indian governments from the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 which limited tribal sovereignty, is neither well-recognized nor represented.

H.R. 685, if amended, could tie into the framework developed by the civil rights theme study by analyzing specific sites associated with the civil rights movement and assessing appropriate alternatives for recognition and protection of these resources. Although a trail might be one such alternative, we note that there are many other designations such as a park unit or vehicular trail route that may also be appropriate. Therefore, we recommend that H.R. 685 be amended to authorize a special resource study that will analyze the opportunities for preservation and interpretation of specific sites related to the civil rights movement in the United States. We would be pleased to work with the committee to develop appropriate language.

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