

SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE HEARS TESTIMONY ON NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

June 24, 2006 - On Thursday afternoon, June 22, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee's National Parks Subcommittee met to hear testimony about a collection of National Heritage Area (NHA) bills. Senators Craig Thomas (R-WY, National Parks Subcommittee Chair), George Allen (R-VA), and Ken Salazar (R-CO) attended and spoke enthusiastically about the value of celebrating our nation's history through the heritage area program – a highly successful concept bringing together local and regional preservation activity, federal engagement through the National Park Service, and public private partnerships.

A Model Program

Originating in the mid-1980s, National Heritage Areas reflect a clear trend in federal preservation policy and funding – a relatively small federal investment in documentation, interpretation and planning that supports a “business model” for sustained funding from nonfederal sources. The program successfully mediates between private property rights and federal engagement in local and state preservation activity. One of the bills under consideration at the hearing (S 2645, The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Heritage Area, a proposed new NHA) includes a provision clarifying that NHA designation does not require that a private property owner allow public access to their property within the NHA, or modify any existing local, state or federal land use ordinances, or require that the property owner participate in the NHA program.

Dr. Michael Sullivan, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management noted at the hearing that the federal government's investment in the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor has yielded \$22 for every federal dollar spent – over \$500 million to date – since 1986.

Earlier this year, the President recommended a 50% reduction in funding for NHAs and proposed to move the program to the Historic Preservation Fund as a competitive grant program. Though the House of Representatives restored the program to its original spot in the NPS budget and FY2006 funding levels, new NHAs or reauthorizations and funding extensions for existing NHAs are meeting resistance fueled by current fiscal realities, not federal disinterest in the program.

The recently-passed supplemental spending bill, including \$43 million for historic preservation activities, gives priority to properties in NHAs within the relief zone. Level funding reflects a great deal of support within Congress, and in the case of funding for NHAs, an incredibly well-coordinated grassroots effort supported by the Alliance of National Heritage Areas.

The NHA program is now hitting a critical maturation point – during a time of budget cuts and reduction in spending on domestic programs, solidifying the program through legislation is one achievable, reasonable goal.

Helping NHAs Succeed and Thrive

The hearing considered reauthorizing and amending existing NHAs and authorizing additional appropriations for these areas, and two bills that would establish two new NHAs: the Sangre de Cristo NHA in Colorado and the **Journey Through Hallowed Ground** NHA that would pull together a diverse significant collection of American historical sites from four states: Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

Dr. Donald Murphy, Deputy Director of the National Park Service testified that the NPS could not support the proposed NHA bills as currently written:

“Reauthorizing existing heritage areas for 15 or more years without the benefit of an assessment of the accomplishments and needs for sustainability, or supporting new designations that are not based upon the completion of comprehensive feasibility studies that adequately address our criteria, does not help the national heritage area program to succeed and thrive.”

The three Senators in attendance were clearly passionate about the value of history and the American landscape, and the NHA program in general. On February 1st of last year, Senator Thomas introduced the National Heritage Partnership Act (S243), a bill that would set into law NHA criteria and program guidelines. S. 243 unanimously passed with an amendment on July 26th last year.

The bill was referred to the House Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks on August 2, 2005. At the hearing this week, Dr. Murphy noted the great need for this legislation. Senator Thomas actively and visibly supports the NHA program – he attended the May 1 Preserve America Awards ceremony in the White House Rose Garden and addressed a group of NHA supporters at a well-attended reception on the Hill this past February.