

**STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE CONCERNING S. 1709 AND H.R. 1239, BILLS TO AMEND THE NATIONAL UNDERGROUND RAILROAD NETWORK TO FREEDOM ACT OF 1998**

**SEPTEMBER 27, 2007**

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 1709 and H.R. 1239, bills to amend the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998. Both bills would adjust the authorized funding levels for the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program and for the associated grant program. S. 1709 would also require a minimum number of staff for the program.

The Department supports enactment of H.R. 1239 as passed by the House. We support increasing the authorization ceiling for operation of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program and decreasing the authorization for the associated grant program, as both H.R. 1239 and S. 1709 would do. However, we object to requiring a minimum number of staff for the program, as S. 1709 would do. That provision was also included H.R. 1239 as introduced, but H.R. 1239 was amended to remove that provision before it was passed by the House.

The Network to Freedom program was authorized by Congress in 1998 through Public Law 105-203 to coordinate and facilitate Federal and non-Federal activities to commemorate, honor, and interpret the history of the Underground Railroad—the story of extraordinary actions of ordinary men and women working in common purpose to free a people. The law calls for producing and

disseminating educational materials, entering into agreements to provide technical assistance to a variety of public and private entities in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean, and creating a symbol for the network. The network was to include both units and programs within the National Park Service and other entities outside the Service that had a verifiable connection to the Underground Railroad story.

Since the program was established, 328 sites, programs, and facilities in 30 States and the District of Columbia have been included in the Network to Freedom. Through this program, which is national in scope but managed from the Midwest Regional Office, the National Park Service coordinates preservation and education efforts nationwide, integrating local historical sites, museums, and interpretive programs into a mosaic of community, regional, and national stories of the Underground Railroad.

In 2000, Congress authorized the Underground Railroad matching grants program through Public Law 106-291 to provide support for preservation of buildings and other structures and related research to members of the network. Funds for these matching grants have been appropriated three times—\$250,000 in Fiscal 2002; \$295,800 in Fiscal 2005, and \$375,000 in Fiscal 2006. In total, 52 grants have been awarded for projects. Several projects involved stabilizing and preserving historic buildings, such as Eleutherian College in Indiana, Constitution Hall in Topeka, Kansas, Mayhew Cabin in Nebraska, and the Oswego School District Public Library in New York. Other projects focused on expanding research in support of site interpretation, such as the archeological survey at John Rankin House in Ohio, or education, such as the “Discovering New Bedford’s Underground Railroad History” program in Massachusetts, a

cooperative project among three local partners.

Through its establishment, the Network to Freedom has brought traditional National Park Service strengths in preservation, interpretation, and planning to new communities. The program carries the message about the cultural and historic aspect of national parks directly to communities of color and opens the door for public participation in the expansion and design of the program at a grassroots level. The program has become an essential part of our ongoing effort to enhance diversity in our parks and programs.

The Network to Freedom's work with outside partners led to the establishment of Friends of the Network to Freedom in 2006. The Friends group will work to raise funds to support cooperative projects, but the funding will not substitute for regular operations funding.

H.R. 1239 and S. 1709 would increase the authorization ceiling for operating the Network to Freedom program from \$500,000 annually, the amount that was set in the 1998 law, to \$2 million. Along with increasing the funding level, S. 1709 would require the Secretary to appoint at least eight full-time equivalent staff to carry out the program. In addition, both bills would reduce the authorization ceiling for the Underground Railroad grant program from \$2.5 million annually, the amount set in the 2000 law, to \$500,000.

When the Network to Freedom program was first authorized, it appeared that \$500,000 annually would be sufficient to operate the program. However, with the addition of the grant program, the growth of the network to more than 300 members, and nine years worth of increases in pay and other fixed costs, the program could justify more than \$500,000 a year in subsequent budget

requests. NPS is spending \$487,000 in FY 2007. An authorization ceiling of \$2 million would enable the Administration to request, and Congress to appropriate, additional funding for this program, subject to overall NPS priorities and the availability of funds.

For the grant program, we believe it is appropriate to reduce the authorization ceiling from \$2.5 million annually to \$500,000. In the seven years of its existence, Congress has not appropriated any amount larger than \$375,000 for grants. With the amounts provided, program staff has been able to provide grants to nearly all network members who have sought them and who have also been able to raise the necessary matching funds.

S. 1709 would require NPS to increase the staff of Network to Freedom program from six to eight. We do not believe it is appropriate to establish a minimum staffing requirement in law. The National Park Service needs to have the flexibility to determine appropriate staffing based on program needs and available funds. Establishing a minimum number of staff in law could hinder efforts to achieve management efficiencies. If the committee acts on S. 1709, we recommend striking Section 2, as was done in the House-passed version of H.R. 1239.

In addition, we do not support providing for funds appropriated pursuant to this authorization to remain available until expended for operations funding, as S. 1709 would do. Allowing such funding to be available until expended would establish budgetary treatment for this program that is different from all other operations funding in the National Park Service. We do support allowing funding for grants to be available until expended, as S. 1709 would also do. If the committee acts on S. 1709, we recommend amending Section 3 to make this distinction. H.R.

1239, as passed by the House, does not provide for funding to be available until expended for either type of spending.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony and I am prepared to answer any questions that you or other members of the committee might have at this time.