

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 3, 2021

The Honorable Shawn Bengel
Deputy Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Deputy Director Bengel,

As the National Park Service considers projects eligible for Fiscal Year 2022 funding under the Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152), we write to support the approval of upgrades to the Cottonwood Visitor Center at Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California.

Each year roughly 3 million visitors drive through the gates of Joshua Tree National Park to explore, hike, and camp across the park's nearly 800,000 acres. Joshua Tree's unique combination of natural beauty, distinct ecosystems, diverse species, and rich cultural history that dates back several millennia draws in visitors from around the world for vacations they will never forget. As representatives from communities across Southern California, we know the value that Joshua Tree brings to our constituents and how investment in the park will protect these benefits for generations to come.

Since officially being designated a National Park in 1994, Joshua Tree's annual appropriation has experienced only moderate increases, despite a 130% increase in visitors in just the past five years - from 1.3 to 3 million visitors. In addition, the park's budget remains below other parks that have significantly fewer annual visitors, making it difficult for the park to fund maintenance and construction projects, even with their additional fee revenue. In fact, the park currently has over \$65 million worth of deferred maintenance needs. The funding provided by the Great American Outdoors Act presents a prime opportunity to address the backlog of maintenance and improve the outdated infrastructure at Joshua Tree.

As your Department assembles recommendations for deferred maintenance and construction projects at National Parks for FY22, we encourage you to give full and fair consideration to the upgrade request for the Cottonwood Visitor Center at Joshua Tree National Park.

The Cottonwood Visitor Center, located at the southern end of the park in Riverside County, is the introduction point to Joshua Tree for more than 1.5 million visitors per year. Despite playing a prominent role for the park, the current complex consists of a double-wide trailer that was originally intended to be a temporary structure when it was put in place more than twenty years ago. The facility lacks space to display meaningful exhibits or information on the park and has inadequate parking and restrooms for the volume of tourists it receives.

Upgrading the Cottonwood Visitor Center is a critical infrastructure project that would benefit millions of visitors by providing additional space for exhibits on the cultural history of local tribal nations, safety orientations, adequate restrooms, and information on hikes and campgrounds.

By investing in this project, the National Park Service would be taking a major step forward in improving the visitor experience to Southern California's largest National Park. Millions of visitors per year would benefit from this improvement and be able to share their experience with friends and family from around the world.

Thank you for your consideration of this project, and we look forward to continuing to work with you on the preservation of our public lands for future generations.

Sincerely,



RAUL RUIZ, M.D.
Member of Congress

PETE AGUILAR
Member of Congress

TONY CÁRDENAS
Member of Congress

MARK TAKANO
Member of Congress

JUAN VARGAS
Member of Congress