

Statement from Laura Williams
submitted to the Full House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
regarding Misconduct and Mismanagement at the National Park Service

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit my written statement.

I worked for the National Park Service (NPS) at Grand Canyon National Park as a Trails Laborer in July and August 2012, and also in January through May of 2013. I worked for the Science and Resource Management Division at Grand Canyon, as an employee of the Grand Canyon Association, as the Night Skies Inventory Coordinator, from May of 2013 through December of 2014.

This past April (of 2016) I received a request, to which I agreed, from investigator [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to voluntarily submit testimony to an investigation into incidents involving Trails employees occurring while I was an employee at the park. From what I understand, the investigation was initiated by the NPS Intermountain Region in Colorado, specifically by [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who I believe is a Human Resources Officer. The investigation was conducted by the independent attorney [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to whom I submitted my testimony.

I have not heard about any action taken at any level regarding this investigation. I have heard, but have not confirmed, that the Regional NPS Office has not yet reviewed the material they received as a result of this investigation.

I included reports of the following incidents in that testimony. I have added some explanatory material and redacted individual victim and witness names in this statement.

In 2012, I worked almost entirely in the field, in the canyon below the rim. I did not meet [REDACTED] Trail Crew Program Manager, more than briefly once or twice during that time.

Toward the beginning of my second period working for Trails, in January or February 2013, [REDACTED] in a work meeting where multiple Trails workers were present, used the phrase “pussification of America.” More than one woman, including me, was present and more than one, including me, objected to the use of this phrase. [REDACTED] recanted and said that he really meant the “gentling” of America.

[REDACTED] in work meetings with the full Trail Crew at which I was present, regularly expressed displeasure with the necessity of adhering to “political correctness.” By this, I understood him to mean that he resented being obliged, as a supervisor in the workplace, to refrain from using language demeaning to women or minorities.

Trails projects regularly required permission from or consultation with other divisions in the park, including the Compliance Division and Science and Resource Management Division. In work meetings with most of the Trail Crew present, including me, [REDACTED] called a specific employee from one of these divisions “crazy” on more than one occasion. In response to one Trails project which was not approved by the Compliance Division, [REDACTED] said in a work meeting, with most of the Trail Crew present, including me, that he wanted to dump a pile of rocks all across the driveway of the employee

responsible for not approving the project and tell this employee that the rocks could not be moved due to historical preservation, which apparently was the reason given by this employee in the Compliance Division for not approving this particular Trails project.

Most Trails workers have a regular 9 days on, 5 days off schedule each pay period, as did I. In April 2013, ██████ changed my schedule for no clear reason. I disagreed, in part because I had made work and personal plans based on my schedule, and also because I believed the required work would be better accomplished if I remained on my existing schedule. When I objected, he told me to come into his office while ██████ (the Deputy Chief of Maintenance at the time) was there, and told me that objecting to his change of my schedule was insubordination, and that, because I was a Seasonal employee, he could change my schedule at will and require that I work overtime at any time. I later determined that this was untrue. At this particular time, the only employee schedules in Trails that were changed were mine and another woman's. My experience in Trails was that ██████ took opportunities to exercise his authority simply to demonstrate that he could, regardless of the necessity of his actions.

In regard to the previous point, I told ██████ that one reason I had a problem with his change to my schedule was because I already had a personal backcountry permit at Grand Canyon for a specific time based on my existing work schedule. ██████ said that he could change my personal backcountry permit to accommodate his change to my work schedule. I was sufficiently acquainted with Backcountry Office personnel and Backcountry Permit rules to know that personal Backcountry Permits cannot be changed by an employee's NPS work supervisor. Either this was a misrepresentation by ██████ or ██████ was permitted to unofficially change Backcountry Permits outside the legal rules for those permits.

I expressed my objections to being treated disrespectfully directly to ██████ and additionally requested a separate meeting (on the same day as the events of the previous two paragraphs) with ██████ (Deputy Chief of Maintenance at the time), who was also witness to the meeting. ██████ said that his impression of the meeting was that "everything was resolved" and he didn't see any problem with it.

Sometime in spring of 2013, a Trails co-worker said to me that if I just went into ██████ office sometimes for casual small talk, that maybe ██████ and I would get along better. I asked this co-worker why I would want to make time in my day to make casual small talk with a bully like ██████. This employee replied that he wanted to keep his job, so he would do what he needed to keep things smooth with ██████.

In the spring of 2013, another Trails co-worker had sustained a severe injury on the job and was unable to work. ██████ in a work meeting with most of the Trail Crew present, told everyone that this employee was "depressed" and that he must have injured an "emotional" body part.

Several relatives of ██████ were employed or contracted by the Trail Crew during 2012 and 2013 (and possibly longer) including a Trails employee related to ██████ by marriage, and the mule shoer (a contractor), who was ██████ brother-in-law.

The work I did on the Trail Crew was to maintain backcountry composting toilets. The Trail Crew workers who maintain backcountry composting toilets are, from my experience in the field, disproportionately women and non-white men. This may, or may not, be evident based on the jobs for which Trails workers are actually hired. While the Trails job postings flown on USA Jobs are sometimes specific to cleaning compost toilets, what I saw in the field (in 2012 and 2013) is that white

men, regardless of what job posting they were hired from, were more likely to be offered other (non-toilet) Trails work, and women or non-white men, regardless of what job posting they were hired from, were more likely to be asked to maintain toilets. Each employee in Trails is required to fill out an FMSS report, with codes to indicate the work they did that day. It may have been possible for someone with access to the FMSS system to document that women and non-white men were more likely to do work (not as work leaders) related to composting toilet maintenance than white men, regardless of the job posting under which those individuals were hired.

One morning in a work meeting in spring of 2013, ██████ told us that a Trails employee had been arrested and had been reported by the arresting officer as yelling, while being arrested, “I’m in Trails, you can’t touch me, call ██████ or something to that effect. I believe this employee was arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and/or assault. Apparently the Grand Canyon Law Enforcement Division has (or had) a video of this incident. ██████ did not reveal the identity of this employee; hearsay says it was an employee who had been a recovering alcoholic who ██████ re-hired after the employee had previously been fired for assault. I was not able to officially confirm this hearsay. In this particular work meeting, ██████ told the Trail Crew that he could not protect any of them against any crime and that he didn’t want anyone to put him in the position of having to explain another video like that to Grand Canyon Law Enforcement. Despite ██████ objections in that meeting, I believe this this incident overall illustrates the degree of power that employees perceived ██████ to have – the employee in this case was not alone in perceiving ██████ to have more power than he actually had. I believe ██████ for the most part encouraged the perception that he had a great deal of power.

Describing the unnecessary safety risks to which ██████ subjected his employees requires explaining some technical details. The manual for the composting toilets, and many commercially available instructions for composting toilets, give the instruction to allow human waste to compost for at least a year before being removed from the tank. Effectively, the top third of the tank of the composting toilet is raw waste, the middle third is being composted, and the bottom third has been composted sufficiently that it is no longer, for the most part, human waste. Bacteria and viruses that exist in human waste are made mostly inert through the composting process with sufficient time (at least a year), otherwise the material is still human waste and potentially substantially more dangerous for anyone coming in contact with it. This is why composting toilet instructions say clearly to empty only the bottom third of a tank. ██████ repeatedly insisted that the complete contents of all tanks be emptied. He never gave a good reason for this except the patently false statement that “cold bacteria eat warm bacteria.” Beneficial bacteria do slow down their composting of viruses and other harmful bacteria during cold weather, which is rather a reason to leave the composting material in the tank for a *longer* period of time to allow the composting process to sufficiently break down human waste. Bacteria that thrive in cold conditions do not “eat” bacteria that thrive in warm conditions. Any microbiologist can confirm this. ██████ seriously jeopardized the safety of his workers with his orders, contrary to all other manuals or instructions, to handle raw human waste by emptying all contents of the compost tanks. Multiple employees objected to this practice.

In either April or May of 2013, I reported all of these incidents to Grand Canyon's Deputy Superintendent Diane Chalfant, in a meeting in her office. I asked for her to keep this information confidential because I feared retaliation. In an attempt to follow up with her by phone a few weeks later, she told me that she had talked to ██████ ██████ (Chief of Maintenance at the time), and, based on that conversation, told me that I “must have been mistaken,” in particular regarding my reporting of disproportionate assignment of women and non-white men to compost cleaning crews. I explained to

her that I understood exactly what was happening and that I was attempting to convey to her what was happening in the field. She dismissed my objections. In that same phone conversation, I attempted to tell her about some events that had occurred subsequent to my initial meeting with her, specifically regarding a Trails employee having reported verbal and physical threats from [REDACTED]. She stated that she “did not have time to respond to every incident” and ended the phone call. She never followed up with me after that, and none of these issues were, to my knowledge, redressed.

When I submitted this testimony to the investigator this past April, I implored the investigator to contact several other individuals who I knew were the victims of or witnesses to even more hostile experiences (in quantity and quality) than mine as Trails workers. My understanding is that the investigator also believed that additional time would be beneficial for this investigation, but that the NPS Regional Office had not allotted him sufficient time to continue this investigation.

At one point in Spring of 2013, I spoke to an EEO officer in the park. This officer was very helpful and informative in regard to explaining all steps of the EEO process to me. When I asked this officer what most people did in my situation, this officer reported the simple statistic to me that most individuals simply chose to leave their jobs rather than try to engage in a long drawn out EEO investigation. This officer was not recommending this action, but rather was responding to my question about the most frequent action taken by individuals in my specific situation.

I recently heard that [REDACTED] is currently under consideration for a promotion to Deputy Chief of the Maintenance Division at Grand Canyon.

Last week I wrote an email to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at the NPS Intermountain Regional Office, in which I requested that this investigation into the Trails Division at Grand Canyon National Park be prioritized. I included the following motivation for this request:

“It is my opinion that retaining [REDACTED] in any supervisory role at Grand Canyon has a sufficiently strong negative impact throughout the park to warrant prioritizing, and extending if necessary, the investigation into the Trails Division that was begun in April.

While the primary responsibility for the hostile work environment at Grand Canyon lies with the park leaders who allowed the work environment to continue, in my opinion, [REDACTED] is personally responsible for a significant portion of the hostile work environment there, even considering the multiple investigations into the River District. I believe [REDACTED] is a skilled manipulator who has, throughout the park, sowed fear, mistrust, gender discrimination, defacto support of sexual harassment, and mis-management of the resource for many years. I believe that it is not possible to heal the work culture at Grand Canyon National Park while [REDACTED] still holds a supervisory role there.

His actions have a ripple effect across the park. He has created a work environment that condones sexual harassment by employees he supervises. His co-workers in multiple divisions must spend hours of work time to carry out their work in the face of [REDACTED] frequent tirades, tantrums, obfuscation, lies, and outright bullying. He is skilled at presenting himself differently to different people, depending on the degree of power he perceives other people to have. Some of his superiors have perceived him to be accommodating and competent, if only

because that's how he chooses to portray himself to them.

When I began working at the park in 2012, I was horrified by what I saw ██████████ doing both inside and outside that Trails Department. Throughout my time at the park, I approached supervisors and administrators with my concerns and complaints. One administrator who privately agreed with my assessment of ██████████ informally recommended that I not take my complaints any further because it simply wasn't possible to win when opposing ██████████. All other park administrators dismissed or ignored my complaints. I documented my formal complaints in my testimony to Mr. ██████████ in the April investigation. The general tenor at Grand Canyon National Park is that ██████████ has to get his way, otherwise he'll make your work life or personal life hell.

I offer you this colloquial description and my strongly worded statements so you can have a clear impression about what I believe is happening on the ground at the park. I feel confident that my opinion is either already backed up by Mr. ██████████ investigation, or could be with time for him to investigate further. I personally supplied Mr. ██████████ with contact information for several additional individuals who were either subjects of or witnesses to ██████████ creation of a hostile workplace. If I understand correctly, Mr. ██████████ was given a limited amount of time to complete this particular investigation and may not have had the opportunity to contact those individuals. I spoke with additional individuals who chose not to submit testimony to this investigation based on their, in my opinion well-founded, fear of retaliation. Their fears have, thus far, been confirmed by the lack of action in this case."

I have not yet received a response to this email.

Multiple employees at Grand Canyon described ██████████ to me as "untouchable." "It's no use to complain," they said. "He'll always be here." Sadly, those employees have been correct, insofar as NPS management has refused to investigate or address his misconduct.

It is worth making the point that retaliation against employees is rarely carried out in such a way that it can be documented as such. Schedules are changed, employee's terms are allowed to expire, employee job duties are changed, etc., generally with a reason that can appear legitimate. I note that even the OIG could not conclude, either way, whether or not some disciplinary actions taken in regard to incidents occurring in the River District were retaliatory. It should be obvious that if an employee cannot effectively be protected against retaliation by even the highest investigative authority of the Department of the Interior, that deeply stifles the likelihood that government employees, particularly current employees for the NPS, will step forward with their complaints. They don't feel protected, and they feel that way for good reason.

In addition, at Grand Canyon National Park, most employees live within the small village inside the park boundaries. This means that you live with the same people you work with. The same supervisor who is creating a hostile work environment knows where you live, what car you drive, who your family is, and who your friends are, simply from the experience of living in the same small community.

Many of my co-workers in the Trails Division were capable, responsible, respectful human beings. Most of them love and take pride in the work they do for the National Park Service, and many of them created as healthy of a workplace as they could given the transgressions of their leadership. My non-

supervisory work leaders in particular treated me with respect and honesty despite any difficulties they may have had working for [REDACTED]. I did not personally experience sexual harassment or discrimination directly from my co-workers. That said, I have no doubt that some Trails employees, in other situations, could have acted in ways that followed [REDACTED] example of creating an abusive and hostile workplace.

Subsequent to working for the Trail Crew at Grand Canyon, I worked with the Grand Canyon Science and Resource Management division to design, build, and carry out the park-wide lighting inventory that made possible the park's Provisional Dark Sky Park designation. While the overall tenor of the department was not as directly hostile as working for [REDACTED], I experienced a different variety of hostile work environment, more specifically focussed on denigrating my work and isolating me from co-workers and collaborators.

I was in an unusual position of being officially employed by the Grand Canyon's fund-raising partner, the Grand Canyon Association (GCA), and yet otherwise entirely working for the NPS. My work location and all supplies were the property of the federal government, and my supervisor was an NPS supervisor.

In May of 2014, my supervisor and a project manager explicitly recommended that I not formally submit my concerns (to the PEPC system) about wilderness protection in regard to a large lighting project at the Visitor's Center at the park. They suggested that if this project didn't get approved, Grand Canyon would lose a large amount of future funding. Apparently, Grand Canyon administrators were not capable of planning and/or carrying out projects to use up allocated funding for the park, which was nonetheless needed for multiple outstanding projects. The large lighting project was intended to use up money that had not been used elsewhere, to give the appearance that the park continued to use and require its current level of funding, regardless of how well the project fulfilled the park's responsibilities of providing lighting where needed, while protecting nocturnal ecosystems and night sky visibility. In short, securing funding trumped the NPS mission of wilderness protection and visitor enjoyment.

I attempted to pursue this issue with my next-line supervisor, Deputy Chief of Science and Resource Management [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and with the Division Chief, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (who has since retired). I discovered that both of them supported the position of my supervisor and the project manager. I also attempted to meet with the park Superintendent, Dave Uberuaga, and was refused. I submitted my concerns about the project to the formal project record in PEPC. I later discovered that my supervisor asked an employee in the Compliance Division to remove my comments from the record, with the justification, in reference to me, that "she's new" and "doesn't know what she's doing." This employee I spoke with in the Compliance Division was very upset about being asked to remove my comments, in part because the whole point of the PEPC system is to create a forum for open comments on NPS projects. So far as I can tell, my comments were completely removed, or at minimum downgraded in importance, from the PEPC record for this project. I later learned from a co-worker that [REDACTED] [REDACTED] "never forgave" me for what she perceived to be a serious transgression, and what I perceived to be integrity in the service of public trust.

Around this time, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and my existing supervisor, who since left the park, asked me explicitly, despite my being a GCA employee, to initiate no further contact with the GCA about the priorities and future of Night Skies protection at the park without first discussing it with [REDACTED]. In other

words, a government employee (██████████) supervising a project on which I was working asked me explicitly to refuse, unless she gave her approval, to communicate about that project with anyone in the organization at which I was employed and from which I was paid to complete that project. There were, to be clear, no national security interests at risk here, though from the request for secrecy one could be forgiven for wondering if there were.

At some point before these events, I had been interviewed, with the approval of the park's Public Affairs office, by a reporter from the Arizona Republic, about the night skies protection program at the park. In this interview, the reporter asked, among other things, about funding for the project and I reported the accurate information that the project was not significantly funded past December 2014. The reporter chose to highlight this information, with the intention of supporting the program and opening an opportunity for additional fund-raising.

Immediately after this article appeared in the Arizona Republic in September 2014, ██████████ (who had become my direct supervisor because my previous supervisor had left the park) told me explicitly to either refer all public inquiries to the park's public affairs office or instead communicate to any media the impression that the project was in the process of being funded, despite simultaneously acknowledging that she knew that was not accurate. I chose to agree to refer media inquiries because I was not willing to agree to publicly distribute false or misleading information. ██████████ also said to me that the article “hurts your cause with the GCA.” I replied that night sky protection was not “my” cause, and that I wasn't promoting a “cause” with the GCA (who was my employer) but rather that night sky protection was responsibility of the park leadership. I never did get a rational nor respectful reply to my questions about why this was a problem.

In November of 2014, I wrote an email to all members of my supervisory chain at the National Park Service and to my employers at the Grand Canyon Association, outlining these and other failures of leadership on the part of the park service and drawing attention to the disparity between the park's public support of night skies protection and internal obstruction of the same. In this email I also documented the voluminous amount of support, appreciation, and accolades I'd received elsewhere (in essence, everywhere outside my direct NPS supervisory chain) for my work at Grand Canyon.

I asked that my official supervisor of record no longer be ██████████ of the NPS and instead that I be assigned a supervisor at the Grand Canyon Association, from whom I received my paychecks. I had become aware that my irregular situation possibly violated more than one NPS policy, and I was additionally concerned that my ambiguous supervisory chain left me without formal protection or any formal grievance process were the situation to continue and/or escalate.

The response from ██████████ Chief of Science and Resource Management for the NPS dismissed all my complaints and concluded her reply to me as follows:

“██████████ will remain as the supervisor of this project and she is committed to working closely with you and to provide guidance as you complete your tasks. If this does not work for you, please tell me. It would be a shame, but we may need to end this portion of the program and shift emphasis to the implementation phase.”

In other words, her reply was that I must continue to accept ██████████ as my supervisor, or lose my job.

In my reply to [REDACTED] I asked:

“I would like to make sure that I understand last paragraph of your email. If I do not agree to continuing with [REDACTED] as my supervisor, would the park choose to end this project early, without completing the work plan we are currently discussing, and recommend to the GCA that they terminate my employment in this position? Did I understand that correctly?”

She replied to me, *“Just to be clear, my statement refers to the NPS project. I was not speaking about your employment status with GCA.”*

I continued to request that my official supervisor be someone at the GCA. The GCA supported my request, and [REDACTED] eventually agreed, and my official supervisor for the remainder of the project was Ted Gwinn at the GCA.

I copied all of this email exchange to Superintendent Uberuaga and Deputy Superintendent Diane Chalfant. I received no reply from either of them. I requested meetings on at least one occasion with the superintendent's office and was refused.

I completed the tasks that were assigned to me and left when the position when funding ended on December 31, 2014.

I have given a great deal of thought to trying to understand how this state of affairs came to be in the park service. I was recently re-acquainted with organizational theory, in particular a book titled “Essence of Decision,” which examines how decisions were made in the U.S. Government at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. As I'm sure some members of the committee are aware, this book explores specifically how organizations often make decisions based not on rationality, but rather on established, unspoken organizational routines.

It is my opinion that the organizational routines of the National Park Service management have evolved to prioritize making everything look good, at all costs. Fear of appearing mismanaged, fear of losing funding, or fear of simply looking bad guide most decision-making at higher management levels. Significant problems are swept under the rug, or simply tolerated, in the service of maintaining positive appearances. Ironically, this practice has led to such gross mismanagement that the NPS looks and is far worse than if administrators had simply acknowledged existing problems and worked to resolve them.

I no longer work for the National Park Service, nor any other government agency, nor do I plan on seeking out employment in the near future with the National Park Service given my experience working at Grand Canyon National Park. I sincerely hope that this statement will contribute toward understanding the existing work culture and creating a new work culture at the National Park Service.

This concludes my written statement. Thank you again to the committee for the opportunity to submit this statement.