The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
Chairman, Committee on Energy
and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am pleased to forward the enclosed Final Chesapeake Bay Special Resource Study and Environmental Impact Statement (Resource Study/EIS). The study was prepared pursuant to direction in the report accompanying the Department of the Interior (DOI) and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for 1999. The Resource Study/EIS examines whether having additional Chesapeake Bay (Bay) resources within the National Park System would meet National Park Service (NPS) criteria for national significance, suitability, and feasibility, and would advance partnership efforts to conserve and restore the Bay. The study focused on determining if establishing a new unit would fill a gap in the National Park System, and evaluated the potential of a new NPS unit to help support current partnership efforts to protect and interpret the Bay. The final special resource study was released to the public in 2004.

At the time of the study’s completion, three historic trail study projects closely related to the Resource Study/EIS were either underway or anticipated. The outcomes of these projects presented an opportunity to explore the relationship between the Bay’s resources and the public, and it appeared timely to hold off on transmittal of the study until this was better understood. This letter presents the recommendations of the Resource Study/EIS in a broader context, and describes these and other recent initiatives that reflect the growing interest in the Bay and recognition of its significance.

The Resource Study/EIS found that the Bay is an outstanding example of a unique set of ecological and cultural elements with long-standing and expansive influence on the history and development of the United States. The Bay is unquestionably nationally significant and a major part of the nation’s heritage. While the Chesapeake can be independently viewed as a significant natural resource, a significant historic and cultural resource, and an area of outstanding recreational opportunities, it can only truly be understood as an interconnected and interdependent mosaic where each part contributes to the overwhelming significance of the whole.
The Honorable Jeff Bingaman

The study presented five alternatives as individual concepts, including a no action/status quo alternative. Extensive opportunities were provided for the public to participate in the Resource Study/EIS; and the study team consulted with Federal, State and local jurisdictions, stakeholder agencies and organizations, resource managers, and other officials. In total, more than 3,000 comments were submitted—over 900 public comments were recorded during open houses; 52 agencies and organizations commented; and 2,107 individuals submitted comments through the NPS website, email, mail or fax. Over 92 percent of the comments supported the reauthorization of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network, more commonly known as the Gateways Network, as the minimum appropriate action. The majority also supported elements of the action alternatives that would make it possible for the Bay’s significance and diversity to be adequately represented.

Most of those who commented observed that key elements of all of the action alternatives could, and should, link together multiple resources that exemplify:

- the Bay’s estuarine character - encompassing water areas and related shorelines areas that protect aquatic resources and reflect the Bay’s importance as habitat, breeding ground and refuge;
- the Bay’s maritime and agricultural heritage - encompassing an area that retains its living, working character and that protects and sustains traditional resource-dependent activities; and
- riparian areas along an exemplary Bay tributary(s) - demonstrating best stewardship practices to conserve and restore the optimal balance between human uses and natural processes.

A national park unit including these elements—when combined with the Gateways Network—could serve as a model for conserving waterways, riparian zones, estuarine waters and wildlife, while also supporting the traditional working landscape that is a critical part of the Bay’s heritage. Such a national park unit might have characteristics similar to Biscayne National Park in Florida, Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area in Massachusetts, Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve in Washington, or Timucuan National Ecological and Historic Preserve along the St. Johns and Nassau rivers in Florida.

Since the Resource Study/EIS was completed, three new national historic trails, wholly or substantially within the Bay watershed, have been designated through amendments to the National Trails Systems Act. The trails are:

- the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, established through P.L. 109-418;
- the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, established through P.L. 110-229; and
- the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, established through P.L. 111-11.

On May 12, 2009, President Obama signed Executive Order 13508 (EO) strengthening the federal role in protection and restoration of the Bay region. The EO establishes a Cabinet level Federal Leadership Committee and requires an overall implementation strategy. The DOI was charged to develop a report recommending action strategies for conserving Chesapeake
landscapes and improving public access to the Bay and its tributaries. The Landscape Conservation & Public Access in the Chesapeake Bay Region Report details a number of recommendations for expanding conserved land in the Bay region, including the designation and expansion of federal management units. The Resource Study/EIS will assist us in moving forward with the specific recommendation to consider a new Bay-focused, National Park unit, allowing us to test where consensus on conservation of significant Chesapeake landscapes meets NPS criteria and aligns with the recommendations of the Resource Study/EIS.

These recent developments serve to further validate the two principal findings of the Resource Study/EIS.

1) A unit of the National Park System encompassing elements of the park, reserve, and preserve concepts meets NPS criteria and would make a significant contribution to the protection and public enjoyment of the Bay. No site-specific proposal was identified while the Resource Study/EIS was in process, but it is the Secretary's intention to convene representatives of the state governors to seek consensus on a new Bay-focused unit of the National Park System that meets NPS criteria and that aligns with the recommendations of the Special Resource Study. Pending consensus, the NPS is prepared to revise its Record of Decision on the Resource Study/EIS to reflect specific new recommendations.

2) The Gateways Network should be enhanced and made permanent with an ongoing funding commitment. The NPS and the DOI support the current effort underway to make the Gateways Network a permanent program of the National Park System with an ongoing funding commitment.

An identical letter is being sent to the Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate; the Honorable Nick J. Rahall II, Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives; and the Honorable Doc Hastings, Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives.

Sincerely,

Thomas L. Strickland
Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks

Enclosure

cc:
The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
The Honorable Robert P. Casey, Jr.
The Honorable Jeff Bingaman

The Honorable Edward E. Kaufman

The Honorable Barbara A Mikulski

The Honorable Arlen Specter

The Honorable Mark R. Warner

The Honorable Jim Webb

The Honorable John P. Sarbanes

The Honorable Roscoe G. Bartlett

The Honorable Michael N. Castle

The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings

The Honorable Donna F. Edwards

The Honorable Steny H. Hoyer

The Honorable Frank Kratovil, Jr.

The Honorable James P. Moran

The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton

The Honorable Glenn C. Nye, III

The Honorable Todd Russell Platts

The Honorable C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger

The Honorable Robert C. Scott

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen

The Honorable Robert J. Wittman