

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 11, 2025

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

The Honorable Jessica Bowron
Acting Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum and Acting Director Bowron,

It has come to our attention that due to National Park Service (NPS) staff reductions and the federal hiring freeze, there are currently no lifeguards this season at the Assateague Island National Seashore (Assateague). We urge you to fill all vacant lifeguard positions at Assateague immediately to protect public safety at this popular beach destination.

Assateague provides unparalleled access to the Atlantic Ocean, allowing visitors to enjoy swimming, surfing, sunbathing, and fishing along the island's miles of pristine beach. With over 2.5 million visitors each year, Assateague ranks as one of the most visited National Park Units.¹ Water recreation activities at Assateague's beaches are a core part of many Marylanders' and other Mid-Atlantic state residents' summers, and the tourism that Assateague brings to the region helps bolster the surrounding rural economy.

NPS depends on seasonally hired lifeguards to patrol Assateague's beaches during the summer months, but as a result of the Trump administration's federal hiring freeze and an overall staff reduction of 24% since President Trump took office,² NPS has not hired any lifeguards at Assateague this year. It is unclear why the Department did not count lifeguards as "public safety" personnel, which would have omitted them from the hiring freeze, as outlined in an April 2025 Department of Interior memo.³ And despite the fact that seasonal employees were finally exempted from the federal hiring freeze on May 2, 2025, NPS still did not manage to hire

¹ NPS.gov. "Assateague Island National Seashore Announces Record Visitation for 2021."

<https://www.nps.gov/asis/learn/news/assateague-island-national-seashore-announces-record-visitation-for-2021.htm>

² National Parks Conservation Association. "Staffing Crisis at National Parks Reaches Breaking Point, New Data Shows 24% Decline in Permanent Workforce," July 3, 2025. <https://www.npca.org/articles/9551-staffing-crisis-at-national-parks-reaches-breaking-point-new-data-shows-24>

³ Department of the Interior. "SO 3427 - Exemption of National Security and Public Safety Positions from Federal Civilian Hiring Freeze," April 3, 2025. <https://www.doi.gov/document-library/secretary-order/so-3427-exemption-national-security-and-public-safety-positions>

lifeguards at Assateague for the summer season. It seems that reduced capacity at NPS from Trump administration funding and staff cuts, combined with the fact that hiring delays forced area lifeguards to look elsewhere for summer employment, have played a role in NPS's failure to put basic measures in place to keep visitors safe at Assateague.

Lives are at risk with no lifeguards at Assateague. Rip currents, large waves, and marine debris are significant hazards that can harm or endanger beachgoers. The CDC estimates 4,500 Americans drown each year, and drowning is the number one cause of death in children ages 1-4 years old.⁴ Lifeguards are critical to preventing drownings and providing first-response care to beachgoers. Last year, lifeguards made at least 24 rescues at Assateague.⁵ On June 10 of this year, a 4-year-old child caught in a choppy surf was rescued by a bystander in the Chincoteague portion of Assateague Island.⁶

Despite the public safety risks, we understand that NPS has no plans to try to hire lifeguards at Assateague this summer. Instead, NPS plans to rely on support from neighboring emergency responders, like those at Maryland's Assateague Island State Park and emergency services from nearby towns – the closest of which is well over 20 minutes away – as well as altering NPS's normal patrol routes to concentrate more on beach areas where lifeguards would normally be stationed. These ad hoc measures are unacceptable; drownings happen in minutes, and there is no substitute for attentive lifeguards specifically assigned to monitoring water safety at Assateague. Furthermore, NPS's current limited safety measures burden neighboring beach safety and emergency response efforts, stretching services too thin and making the entire area less safe for residents and visitors alike.

We urge you to fill all vacant lifeguard positions at the Assateague Island National Seashore immediately, and we look forward to hearing back from you as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Angela Alsobrooks
United States Senator

⁴ CDC Vital Signs. "Drowning Increases in the U.S.," June 18, 2024.
<https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/drowning/index.html>

⁵ Shore Daily News. "Chincoteague Town Council discusses lack of lifeguards on Assateague," June 11, 2025.
<https://shoredailynews.com/headlines/chincoteague-town-council-discusses-lack-of-lifeguards-on-assateague/>

⁶ News Tribune. "At some federal beaches, surf's up but lifeguard chair's empty," July 6, 2025.
<https://www.newstribune.com/news/2025/jul/06/at-some-federal-beaches-surfs-up-but-lifeguard/>