



THE BURGEONING BACKLOG

A Report on the Maintenance Backlog in America's National Parks



National Parks Conservation Association
May 2004



One of the C&O Canal National Historical Park's two canal boats, replicating the historic boats which once pulled coal from Cumberland, MD, to Washington, D.C., and supplies for Union troops at Gettysburg, is now dilapidated, limiting the National Park Service's ability to share this story with 2.7 million visitors annually.

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"The federal government has clear responsibility for the Everglades, as in each of the nearly 400 other national parks. In recent years, that obligation has sometimes been neglected. Many parks have lacked the resources they need for their basic care and maintenance. My administration will restore and renew America's national parks."

President George W. Bush
Everglades National Park
June 4, 2001

O V E R V I E W

From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream islands, America's national parks are the touchstones of our shared history and culture and protect our breathtaking national heritage. But the parks have been withering for years, suffering without sufficient staff and operating funds. As a result, despite the best efforts of park employees and volunteers, visitors may not see many national park rangers this summer, but they will see crumbling roads, visitor centers that are outdated and unsafe, overgrown vistas, and campgrounds and trails that are poorly maintained.

Nearly four years ago, George W. Bush announced his intention to "eliminate" the backlog of park maintenance projects and "restore and renew" America's national parks. It was a promise repeated often. President Bush even included the pledge in his 2001 State of the Union address to the Congress. But the backlog continues to grow. Congress and the administration have failed to fund the elimination of the backlog or provide sufficient annual funding to meet the parks' operating shortfall, which would stem the backlog's growth.

Instead, through creative accounting and forecasting, some in the administration seek to take credit for providing \$4.9 billion toward the maintenance backlog by fiscal year 2006. Yet only \$662 million is new funding—the rest includes funding raised by national park visitors' entrance fees or money already coming to the parks for day-to-day repairs over the past four years.

The national parks' deferred maintenance backlog, now estimated at \$4.1 billion to \$6.8 billion, is more than double the Park Service's entire annual operating budget. It includes projects such as visitor center repairs, invasive species removal, electrical and fire-suppression system upgrades, road and bridge rehabilitation, and historic building restoration.

Something can be done.

Half of the administration's strategy for eliminating the parks' maintenance backlog was to include \$2.7 billion for road and bridge maintenance from the reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, currently pending in Congress. The Senate version of the legislation allocates more than \$300 million a year for the national parks, of which \$270 million annually would be available for repairing and rebuilding park roads and bridges over the next six years.

But this will not happen without active legislative leadership by the administration and Congress. The transportation bill, one step toward addressing the backlog, can't pass soon enough—the nation's heritage is at risk.

Recommendations for Addressing the Parks' Maintenance Backlog

- ◆ Congress and the administration should take a significant step toward addressing the maintenance backlog and enact the Senate version of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, which provides more than \$300 million annually over the next six years for park transportation needs such as road and bridge rehabilitation.
- ◆ The backlog of one-time park maintenance projects is created and exacerbated by a shortfall in the annual operating budget of the National Park Service. Congress and the administration must address the \$600 million annual operating shortfall that is crippling our national parks. Eighty-four members of the U.S. House of Representatives and 20 senators this May signed letters to the appropriators requesting an additional \$240 million for national park operations in the fiscal year 2005 Interior Appropriations bill.
- ◆ While it is only part of the solution to the parks' backlog maintenance needs and cannot supplant federal dollars, Congress and the administration should make the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program permanent for national parks.
- ◆ The National Park Service's new Facility Condition Index, which assesses the condition of historic structures and park buildings throughout the system, should be viewed as a means of prioritizing park maintenance projects and identifying the level of annual funding required to maintain structures at an acceptable level. It does not present an opportunity for Congress and the administration to gloss over the critical needs of the national parks or overstate accomplishments.

- ◆ Increased attention to park management and fiscal responsibility can only help the National Park Service manage its \$5-billion backlog of park maintenance needs. The Park Service must continue to make the training and hiring of personnel for management effectiveness a priority. Measures must be taken to ensure that park managers have the tools needed to make the most effective choices about where to put their limited financial and human resources in current and coming years. All of the sites within the National Park System should complete and implement a business plan to help guide these decisions.

Overwhelming Backlog Maintenance Needs

Many national parks have had to defer maintenance projects because of decades of insufficient annual operating funds and staff. On average, national parks operate with only two-thirds of the needed funding, a system-wide shortfall in excess of \$600 mil-

lion annually. Without adequate resources to address day-to-day needs, a leaky roof quickly becomes a dilapidated building. According to a January 2003 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office, the maintenance backlog in the national parks now totals \$4.1 billion to \$6.8 billion.

Critical backlog projects can be found throughout the National Park System, which includes some of the most spectacular landscapes in the country and some of the nation's most historically significant sites. Some of the examples shared in the media over the past few years include:

- ◆ Washington's Mount Rainier National Park has a backlog in excess of \$100 million—half of which is road repair. Hikers cannot get to backcountry cabins because bridges and trails leading to the buildings are in disrepair.
- ◆ At Dry Tortugas National Park in South Florida, large sections of a historic lighthouse and Fort Jefferson—the largest all-masonry fortification in North America—are structurally unsafe. Fort Jefferson once held one of the nation's most



Parts of historic Fort Jefferson in Dry Tortugas National Park are structurally unsafe.

famous prisoners: Dr. Samuel Mudd, the doctor who set John Wilkes Booth's leg, injured as the actor escaped from Ford's Theatre after assassinating President Lincoln.

- ◆ The visitor center at the *USS Arizona* Memorial in Hawaii is sinking and may cost as much as \$20 million to repair—a cost that exceeds the entire annual budget for the seven national park sites in the state.
- ◆ Yosemite National Park has more than \$40 million worth of backlog projects, including trail and campground maintenance, sewer system replacement, and electrical upgrades.
- ◆ The South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona houses numerous buildings designed by Mary Elizabeth Jane Colder, an architect whose work reflects Native American influences. Most of these structures, from the Hopi House to the Bright Angel Lodge, are on the National Register of Historic Landmarks but lack funds for preservation. These projects are counted among \$60 million worth of backlog maintenance at the park.
- ◆ The \$20-million maintenance backlog at Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Tennessee is affected by annual operating shortfalls that limit the Park Service's ability to hire any seasonal employees this summer to help with maintenance.
- ◆ Ancient stone structures are literally collapsing at Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico.
- ◆ At Yellowstone, 150 miles of roads have not been repaired in years, and many of the park's several hundred buildings, including those used to house park employees, are in woeful condition.
- ◆ Glacier's backlog of deferred maintenance needs exceeds \$400 million. The total includes \$10 million to construct a new west-side visitor center, more than \$150 million to stabilize historic hotels, and about \$150 million to rehabilitate historic Going-to-the-Sun Road.
- ◆ The administration estimates that road and bridge rehabilitation in Alaska's national parks will cost more than \$27 million over the next six years.



Roads and bridges throughout the National Park System need repair, such as this road in Grand Teton National Park.

President Bush has pointed out some of these problems to underscore the importance of eliminating the maintenance backlog. In 2000, he cited a leaking roof at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania. Four years later, the roof still leaks, but a partnership project is under way to build a new visitor center and museum to adequately preserve the historic cyclorama painting now housed in the original building.

In the meantime, as reported by the *York Sunday News*, Gettysburg has \$5.2 million worth of backlog maintenance needs. Park projects include rehabilitation of historic structures, repairing fences in the area of Gen. Pickett's charge, replacing a failing water line, and restoration of the historic Culver House, site of the first shots of the battle. But because of insufficient operating funds, Gettysburg can't fill six vacant maintenance positions this year, resulting in an estimated \$215,900 in deferred maintenance work, which adds to the backlog.

Gettysburg is not alone. "We address backlogged maintenance, but then we can't maintain it properly and we end up with a backlog again," Crater Lake National Park's chief of maintenance told the *Oregonian* in September 2003.

One means for addressing backlog maintenance is the Park Service's Recreational Fee Demonstration Program, which allows some parks to charge entrance and recreational fees and retain at least 80 percent of funds collected for use on maintenance projects within that specific park. Since the fee demonstration program began in fiscal year 1997, it has provided \$584 million to the Park Service, with another estimated \$250 million in fiscal years 2003 and 2004. NPCA supports legislation to make the program permanent in national parks, currently pending in Congress.

Department of Interior Secretary Gale Norton recently celebrated Shenandoah National Park's use of monies generated by the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program to support the restoration of historic structures at Rapidan Camp, President

Herbert Hoover's "summer White House." Unfortunately, because of annual operating shortfalls, funding to maintain the site and interpret it for visitors remains uncertain.

The "Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century" bill (TEA-21) now pending in Congress provides an additional source of funding to help address the national parks' maintenance backlog. This bill is currently threatened with a presidential veto, but in 2000, the administration estimated that \$2.7 billion would be available from the reauthorization of this transportation bill to meet the president's pledge to eliminate the backlog.

As it stands, the bill will not provide nearly this much funding, but could still help to address a significant chunk of the parks' backlog maintenance needs. National parks currently receive \$165 million annually through TEA-21. If Congress and the administration enact the Senate version of this legislation (S. 1072), the national parks stand to receive more than \$300 million a year for the next six years, with \$270 million available annually for road and bridge rehabilitation projects in the parks—a total investment of \$1.6 billion.

Action is needed—and soon.

Limited Progress

Regrettably, little progress has been made toward meeting the funding and staffing needs of the national parks. The small operating increases provided by Congress and the administration have been diverted in recent years to cover homeland security expenses and other unfunded mandates. As a result, most individual parks operate with fewer resources each year—a critical issue when attempting to reduce the backlog over the long term. Parks are forced to defer maintenance projects, increasing the cost of repairs and the size the backlog.

In a farewell address to the Greater Yellowstone Coalition in June 2001, former Yellowstone National Park superintendent Michael Finley said, "Lack of sufficient funding will continue to be the greatest long-term threat to the protection of Yellowstone's natural and cultural treasures...In my 32-year career with the National Park Service, I never had sufficient funding to properly undertake my responsibilities. I always ran parks with a budget appropriate to a run-down Volkswagen. What we really wanted was a budget appropriate to a midsize Chevy."

Understandably, economic realities and pressing national security issues have made it more difficult to address National Park Service funding, yet some in the administration continue to claim to be on track to provide \$4.9 billion toward the backlog. The Park Service's July 2003 report, *Partnering and Managing for Excellence*, stated that the administration's com-

mitment "was achieving tangible results. Since FY 2002, nearly \$2.9 billion has been provided to address the \$4.9 billion backlog." But the math is misleading. The actual amount of new money invested by the administration in the backlog over the past four years is closer to \$662 million.

Park visitors provided revenue through the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program that the administration misleadingly counts as funding it has allocated toward the maintenance backlog. The administration also assumes that all of the funding for maintenance and construction is allocated solely toward the list of backlog projects and is not diverted to pay for emergency repairs or other needs identified as urgent priorities by Park Service managers, as often happens when operational needs far outstrip available resources.



The Ebenezer Baptist Church at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Georgia is slated to receive restoration funds in fiscal year 2005.

Deferred Maintenance Backlog Funding

FY 2001 enacted:	\$814,568,000	(base level)
FY 2002 enacted:	\$873,896,000	+\$59,328,000 above FY01
FY 2003 enacted:	\$899,412,000	+\$84,844,000 above FY01
FY 2004 enacted:	\$1,035,092,000	+\$220,524,000 above FY01
FY 2005 request:	\$1,112,206,000	+\$297,638,000 above FY01
TOTAL NEW FUNDING (cumulative):		+\$662,334,000 above FY01

NPCA's analysis of the Park Service's backlog justification shows that during the last four years of the Clinton administration (FY98 – FY01), funding for the programs that address the backlog of park maintenance projects (facility maintenance, construction, park roads, and the recreational fee demonstration program) increased, on average, 12.8 percent annually. Funding for the backlog under the current administration (FY02 – FY05 request) has increased, on average, only 7.4 percent annually for the same programs.

In order to keep the parks from falling any farther behind, the administration and Congress must allocate an additional \$600 million in new funds toward park operations and provide a significant investment toward reducing the backlog.

The administration's fiscal year 2005 budget request includes small operating increases for 74 of 387 parks, but does not allocate nearly enough funds to fulfill the president's pledge to eliminate the backlog or make up any significant portion of the parks' annual operating shortfall.

The administration's fiscal year 2005 budget includes:

- ◆ **Construction and Major Maintenance:** \$329.9 million for major maintenance and construction projects in the parks, the same as fiscal year 2004 enacted levels.

Among the projects that the administration proposes funding in fiscal year 2005 are the historic bathhouses at Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas, which need intensive restoration work; a new museum to preserve and interpret American Indian culture at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska; restoration of the Ebenezer Baptist Church at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Georgia; and elimination and rehabilitation of off-road vehicle trails at Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida.

Unfortunately, limited funding is available within the construction and major maintenance budget for park managers to administer such projects, so time spent by park staff overseeing restoration or construction affects the individual park's already-stretched operating budget.

- ◆ **Facility Maintenance:** An increase of \$23 million for facility maintenance. This money addresses needs such as roof repair at park visitor centers and helps to slow the growth of the maintenance backlog.

Addressing the Backlog

One of the most significant steps that the administration has taken to address the backlog is the effort to identify the true extent of the problem through the Facility Condition Index. With the encouragement of the General Accounting Office, the National Park Service has nearly completed the Herculean task of assessing the size of the maintenance backlog—an important component of strategic park management. This process will enable the Park Service to set a benchmark for the preservation of designated facilities in the park system, and then apply a reliable dollar figure to the cost of bringing facilities in line with that benchmark.

NPCA supports this effort and encourages the Park Service to set a high standard for the condition of facilities in its care, from roads and visitor centers to historic buildings, to ensure that these places are in a suitable condition to welcome visitors this summer and in the future.

Although the Facility Condition Index is not yet complete, current estimates place the cost for restoring appropriate national park facilities to the designated condition much lower than prior estimates of the size of the deferred maintenance backlog: perhaps below \$3 billion.

This new figure, when formally announced, will be a more accurate assessment of the maintenance backlog in the national parks. The lower cost estimate does not necessarily imply that a large number of deferred maintenance projects has been addressed, but rather, it is an indication that the backlog is being more specifically defined and standardized. The need for increased annual operating funds has not in any way diminished as this funding is essential to stem the growth of the backlog.

Moreover, neither the Facility Condition Index nor the new cost estimate associated with the backlog should allow Congress and the administration to gloss over the critical needs of the parks or overstate accomplishments. Instead, the Index is a new yardstick by which we can measure progress toward improving and maintaining our national parks for future generations.

Conclusion

The well-documented funding needs for park maintenance are not overwhelming. In fact, as this report illustrates, a good portion of the maintenance backlog can be addressed with funding currently tied up in the transportation bill. Funding the parks' transportation needs through this legislation this year would make a big difference in the health of our national parks and would begin to address the backlog of deferred park maintenance projects over several years. The longer repairs are delayed, the more costly the eventual repairs.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the importance of addressing the parks' \$600 million annual operating shortfall. Until the administration and Congress address the annual operating needs of the national parks, the parks' maintenance backlog will persist—undermining the presidential promise to “restore and renew” America's national parks.

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NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
1300 19th Street, N.W., Suite 300, Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-223-6722 Fax: 202-659-0650
www.npca.org

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