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The Maintenance Needs of the National Park Service

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Before the
Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee;

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our recently issued report on the maintenance needs of the National Park Service (NPS).[1] That work, done at your request, Mr. Chairman, examined

-- the adequacy of funding for park maintenance activities, the extent to which maintenance in the park system is being deferred, and the effect of such deferrals;

-- the effect that the current level of funding is having on maintenance staffing;

-- the condition of and funding adequacy for the park road system; and

-- the effectiveness of the servicewide Maintenance Management System in improving the parks' ability to identify, report, and address maintenance needs.

In carrying out our work, we sent questionnaires to the managers of all 337 park units, interviewed NPS officials responsible for servicewide maintenance activities, and visited 12 park units in 4 NPS regions. We also discussed park road conditions with Federal Highway Administration officials. We received responses to our questionnaire from 267 park unit managers, representing 94 percent of the total number of park units.[2]

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[1]Parks and Recreation: Park Service Managers Report Shortfalls in Maintenance Funding (GAO/RCED-88-91BR, March 21, 1988).

[2]Some of the responses included consolidated data for several park units because the park managers have maintenance responsibility for more than one park unit.

In summary, the majority of park unit managers responding to our questionnaire reported shortfalls in funding for NPS maintenance activities, including road maintenance. Park unit managers also reported inadequate maintenance staffing at fiscal year 1987 funding levels. These shortfalls have resulted in maintenance deferrals and asset deterioration. Also, because the servicewide Maintenance Management System is only now being installed, it is too early to tell how much of an impact the system will have in improving the parks' ability to identify, report, and address maintenance needs.

Before getting into the details of our report, I would like to provide a perspective of the magnitude and diversity of NPS maintenance activities. NPS operates and maintains an extensive inventory of buildings and other facilities including 7,975 miles of roads, 1,367 bridges, 1,300 water systems, 125 sewage treatment plants, and over 16,000 buildings. The cost to maintain these assets is great. In fiscal year 1987, $234 million was appropriated for park maintenance.

SHORTFALLS IN MAINTENANCE FUNDING

The park unit managers responding to our questionnaire reported a $1.9 billion shortfall in maintenance funding for fiscal year 1987, which included about

-- $1.6 billion for capital improvement projects such as road repair and general park facilities construction projects;

-- $125 million for cyclic maintenance activities;

-- $52 million for routine, daily park needs; and

-- $138 million for such needs as employee housing, equipment replacement, and historic restoration.

Most of the $1.9-billion shortfall--about $1.4 billion, or 74 percent--was reported by 20 park unit managers. In general, these park units have extensive infrastructures including roads, utility systems, recreational facilities, housing and other structures, as well as high visitor use. In contrast, 24 park unit managers reported that their maintenance funding needs were adequately met.

FUNDING SHORTFALLS ARE RESULTING IN MAINTENANCE DEFERRALS AND ASSET DETERIORATION

According to most of the park unit managers responding to our questionnaire, the shortfalls in maintenance funding have resulted in maintenance deferrals and asset deterioration. For fiscal year 1987

-- 20 percent of the park managers reported having to defer between 41 and 100 percent of needed maintenance,

-- 18 percent reported having to defer between 21 and 40 percent of needed maintenance,

-- 37 percent reported only minor deferrals, and

-- 25 percent reported no deferrals.

More importantly, some of the reported deferred maintenance was health and safety-related. Specifically, despite NPS' priority for correcting health and safety-related maintenance deficiencies, 215 park managers reported having to defer some maintenance that

was health and safety-related, while 58 park unit managers reported that all deferrals represented health and safety maintenance needs.

The impact of deferrals reported by park unit managers, regardless of whether or not they were health and safety-related, was asset deterioration--a situation we confirmed at the 12 parks we visited. We found that asset deterioration ranged from minor, such as unmowed grass and peeling paint, to near total loss, such as structures collapsing and trails closed to hikers.

SHORTFALLS IN MAINTENANCE STAFFING

For fiscal year 1987, a shortfall of 1,176 full-time equivalent maintenance staff was reported by 181 park unit managers. The remaining 86 managers did not provide complete information. This shortfall represented a need for 35 percent more maintenance staff than fiscal year 1987 levels.

During our visits, park managers told us that maintenance staff shortages have been a way of life for many years. At several park units, park managers told us of having to cut back on routine maintenance because of staffing shortages and noted that, in some cases, the maintenance workload had increased without corresponding increases in staff.

The reported impact of staffing shortfalls is accelerated asset deterioration and maintenance deferral. Park managers told us that park roads, trails, and buildings were suffering the greatest increase in deteriorated condition as a result of these shortages.

PARK ROADS RATED IN POOR CONDITION

In 1981, the Federal Highway Administration issued the results of its assessment of all park roads, bridges, and tunnels between 1978 and 1981.[3] Between 1983 and 1986, the Highway Administration conducted another inspection of roads, bridges, and tunnels and issued an updated report in 1987.[4]

A comparison of these two reports indicates that the overall condition of NPS' 8,000-mile system of paved and unpaved roads has deteriorated since 1981. For example, the portion of the system rated in "poor" condition increased from 44 to 50 percent, while the portion rated in "good" condition decreased from 25 to 21 percent. The responses we received from our questionnaire support the Highway Administration study results.

The condition of bridges and tunnels, on the other hand, has improved since 1981. In 1987, 104 fewer structures were rated by the Highway Administration as critically deficient and requiring replacement or reduced load limits as compared to 1981. Still, about 8 percent--117 of the 1,427 bridge and tunnel structures in the NPS inventory--were classified as deficient in 1987.

ROAD FUNDING REPORTED AS INADEQUATE

About 58 percent of the park unit managers reported that the amount of maintenance that they were able to perform under fiscal year 1987 funding was not sufficient to enable them to prevent further road deterioration. By comparison, only 29 percent

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[3]The National Park Service Road and Bridge Inventory/Inspection Program, 1978-81, Apr. 1981.

[4]Draft report entitled Park Roads and Parkways: Condition and Needs, June 24, 1987.

reported that they had been able to maintain current road conditions. The remaining 13 percent reported that they were able to improve road conditions with fiscal year 1987 funds.

NPS also receives funds for larger road reconstruction and repair projects through the Federal Lands Highway Program. According to the Highway Administration, even though $375 million from the Federal Lands Highway Program was committed to NPS road projects between 1983 and 1986, park road conditions declined during that time with approximately 570 more miles of road being added to the list of roads in the poorest condition. The Highway Administration estimates that the current backlog of road, bridge, and tunnel needs is $1.7 billion and that at the current level of funding--$60 million per year for 5 years--continued road deterioration can be expected.

In visiting 12 park units, we observed examples of road deterioration resulting from the lack of adequate maintenance. This deterioration ranged from lack of road shoulder mowing to cracks and holes in road surfaces.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MAINTENANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

In June 1984, we reported on the need for a systematic servicewide approach for planning, organizing, directing, and reviewing NPS maintenance activities to assure that park assets received needed upkeep and that park maintenance activities were efficient.[5] Following this report, the Congress mandated implementation of a servicewide system for managing NPS maintenance.

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[5]National Park Service Needs a Maintenance Management System (GAO/RCED-84-107, June 1984).

NPS began developing the Maintenance Management System in July 1986. By the end of September 1987, the system had been installed, but not fully implemented, in about 75 park units. As a result, we could not assess the effectiveness of the Maintenance Management System. However, on the basis of our review of the system design and discussions with NPS officials, the system should have the essential elements necessary to help parks better document maintenance needs and manage maintenance activities. Further, while park managers currently assign priorities to maintenance activities to assure that essential work is completed first, the Maintenance Management System should provide a better tool for making such decisions.

GAO OBSERVATIONS

We recognize that there is no simple solution for ensuring adequate maintenance funding. Increased funding, for example, may not be feasible given the current budget constraints being faced governmentwide. Similarly, alternative sources of funding such as donations and the use of volunteer forces may not be practical solutions in all parks.

The Maintenance Management System should provide a partial solution by enabling park unit managers to more effectively manage maintenance servicewide. More importantly, it should provide managers with a better tool to use in assigning current NPS priorities to maintenance activities. The use of this tool becomes particularly crucial in times of budgetary constraints, when managers need to maximize the effective use of available resources.

The extent to which the Maintenance Management System will mitigate the effects of funding shortfalls through increased efficiency and effectiveness will not be known until the system is fully implemented. However, because the reported need is so much greater than available funding--a difference of $1.9 billion in

fiscal year 1987--it is doubtful that the Maintenance Management System, alone, will be able to solve the funding shortfall problem.

Difficult as these problems may be, until a solution is reached servicewide, the backlog of deferred maintenance projects will likely continue to grow and assets will continue to deteriorate.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. At this time, with your permission, I would like to show some slides which illustrate the deterioration in park assets that we observed during our park visits. After the slides, I will be happy to respond to any questions.