



COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES DEMOCRATS

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Important Work to be Done: The National Park Service's Maintenance Backlog April 2005

As a candidate for President in 2000, George W. Bush repeatedly promised to “eliminate the \$4.9 billion [National Park Service] maintenance backlog in five years.” Now, five years later, the Bush Administration claims to have kept its word.

In reality, that pledge has not been honored, and this lack of investment in our National Parks is degrading the visitor experience as well as the historic value of some of the most special places in America. Continued failure to address deferred maintenance, which includes major repair work on the trails, structures, roads, recreation sites and other infrastructure in the National Park System that could not be completed when planned, could even endanger visitor safety.

Visitor centers with roofs that have been leaking for years, restroom facilities employing septic and sewer systems decades past due for replacement, and roads and trails that have become unstable over time greet Park visitors. Eventually, facilities, trails, and roads with serious deferred maintenance needs will have to be closed to protect the safety of the families visiting our Parks.

In addition, resources for other Park programs such as basic park operations, recreation, interpretation, and new construction must be diverted to address deferred maintenance. Over time, the strain of the backlog will have negative impacts throughout the entire National Park System.

The problem has worsened because spending on the backlog has never come anywhere near \$4.9 billion in new money. Rather than “eliminating” the backlog, the Bush Administration has only allowed it to grow larger.

The Bush Campaign, followed by the Bush Administration, relied on a *General Accounting Office* report completed in 1998, which estimated the backlog to be \$4.9 billion. That figure was the result of a survey of Park Superintendents, however, and may well have under reported some aspects of the problem while also including some “wish-list” new construction projects that were not really “maintenance.”

A more recent report (March 2005) from the *Congressional Research Service* estimates the size of the backlog to be between \$4.52 and \$9.69 billion. The National Park Service itself recently began using a “sliding scale” which estimates the cost of getting all facilities and infrastructure in the Park System into “perfect” condition to be \$5.7 billion, with a lower figure for “acceptable” condition.

Using the smallest of these figures, the Bush Administration position is something like the following: we have spent \$4.9 billion over five years to “eliminate” a \$4.9 backlog and now that backlog is only \$4.52 billion. Or perhaps \$5.7 billion. Or maybe \$9.69 billion.

Part of the reason for this confusion is that the Administration is trying to hide the fact that they are about \$4 billion short on the promise to spend \$4.9 billion. Funding for the backlog has increased about 35% over five years under President Bush. While this is a good first step, it is far short of the \$1 billion a year in new money, an increase of nearly 125%, that candidate George W. Bush promised. This massive funding shortfall explains why the backlog, far from being “eliminated,” has only grown larger under President Bush.

The Administration’s response to these facts has been to ignore its obvious failure to keep the President’s pledge and simply repeat the misleading claim that they have spent \$4.9 billion on the backlog. This is much like a repairman telling you that, while your toilet or faucet or roof is still not fixed, at least the work he has done cost exactly what he said it would. No wonder the public is confused.

The bottom line is that more spending on the backlog is necessary to preserve our national heritage and to provide an enjoyable visitor experience. The amount of money needed to “eliminate” the backlog, as President Bush promised, is significant, but is only a small fraction of the costs associated with the Administration’s plan to make the tax cuts permanent. The Administration needs to decide that Parks, which belong to all Americans, are more important than tax cuts, which are handed to only a privileged few.

The next time you visit a unit of the National Park System, look closely at the roads, trails and buildings. What shape are they in? Are all parts of the Park open to the public at all times? If not, ask why not. Both the National Park Service, as well as your elected representatives in Congress, need to know that the state of our National Parks is important to you and your family. Providing specific examples from your own visits to our National Parks is a powerful way to help in this fight.