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## NATIONAL PARKS:

Make the National Park Service less reliant on politically driven Congressional appropriations — *by Shawn Regan and Reed Watson*

At his confirmation hearing in January, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke pledged that the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog will be one of his top priorities.<sup>7</sup> Estimated at \$12 billion, the Park Service's maintenance backlog refers to the total cost of all maintenance projects that were not completed on schedule and therefore have been put off or delayed. The backlog is now nearly four times higher than the agency's latest budget from Congress, and it has emerged as one of the major issues facing the Interior Department.<sup>8</sup>

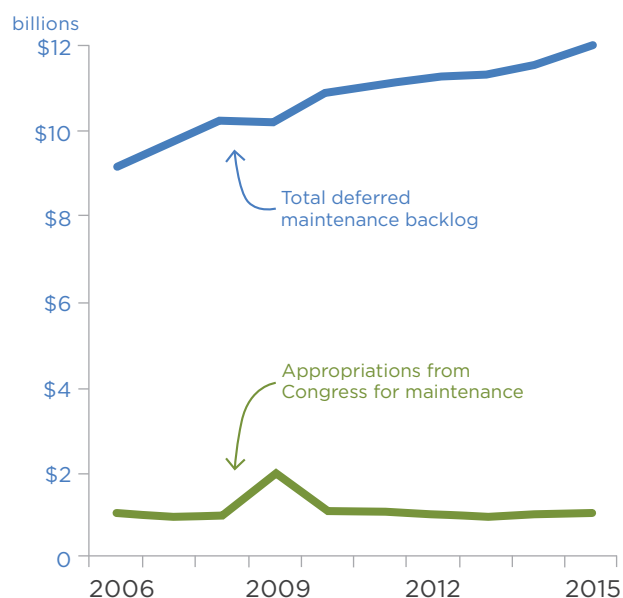
If Secretary Zinke wants to fix the national park maintenance problem, he is going to have to look beyond Congress for solutions. Decades of neglect and misplaced priorities have made it clear that relying on Congress is hardly the solution; in fact, it's the root of the problem.

For obvious reasons, Congress has not prioritized maintenance in national parks. Fixing a leaky sewer system or crumbling road is not the type of ribbon-cutting project that politicians are eager to fund. Hence, funding for the deferred maintenance backlog makes up only a fraction of the annual appropriations the National Park Service receives from Congress each year.

Over the past decade, Congress allocated approximately \$1 billion on average each year for maintenance projects in national parks.<sup>9</sup> That amounts to a drop in the bucket of the total backlog, which has grown by 31 percent over that same time period.

Merely increasing the Park Service's budget, however, is unlikely to solve the issue. In fact, an over-reliance on Congress for funding will likely only make the problem worse because Congress would rather create new parks or acquire more land than fund routine maintenance projects. The number of park units managed by the Park Service has grown significantly over the past decade—from 390 in 2006 to 417 today. Meanwhile, the agency's overall budget, as well as the amount of funding devoted to maintenance projects, has remained relatively constant. With more parks but little or no additional funding, the agency's resources are stretched thinner and thinner. Unless changes are made, the National Park Service estimates the backlog will continue to increase as new units are created and its existing assets continue to deteriorate.<sup>10</sup>

### CONGRESSIONAL APPROPRIATIONS TO MAINTENANCE IN NATIONAL PARKS



Source: Government Accountability Office.  
Congressional Research Service.

To address the root of this issue, the National Park Service will have to become less dependent on politically driven Congressional appropriations. That means relying more on park visitors, instead of Congress, for revenue. Today, most park user fees can be retained where they are collected, rather than being sent back to the U.S. treasury, allowing local park managers to address critical maintenance needs without relying entirely on Congress for appropriations.

But more could be done to give park managers flexibility in setting fee schedules. For example, park superintendents could be given the discretion to charge higher fees during holiday weekends and other popular times. This would allow them to collect more revenue for maintenance and use prices to limit congestion. Other ideas, such as harnessing public-private partnerships and tapping the private sector to help with park operations and maintenance, could also help—as long as park leaders are willing to think entrepreneurially about maintenance.

## Policy Reforms:

- Allow park managers to charge recreation fees and retain the revenues for maintenance and other critical projects by permanently reauthorizing the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.
- Allow park managers to set their own fee programs or establish new, flexible fee-based services, such as dynamic or congestion pricing, as needed without having to obtain additional approvals from Congress.
- Harness public-private partnerships to address unfunded infrastructure projects.
- Outsource routine park operations, such as campground management and facility maintenance, to the private sector while maintaining public ownership and oversight.

## Further Reading:

- “Breaking the Backlog: 7 Ideas to Address the National Park Deferred Maintenance Problem.” *PERC Public Lands Report* (February 2016).