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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20515-6015

March 19, 2004

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Fran Mainella
Director
National Park Service
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Dear Director Mainella:

We have read with great interest the newspaper reports from across the country over the last two weeks about the need to reduce dramatically park hours and other related visitor services this summer. This decision is alarming given the high priority attention this Committee has given the Parks over the years. While the Committee understands that the parks and other agencies have had to absorb partial costs for pay increases, anti-terrorism needs and storm damage for the last three years because of tight budgets, the parks have also received in excess of \$264 million in operational increases since 1997, which is nearly \$100 million over the amounts requested by the Service in annual budget submissions over that time period.

As we have demonstrated in the past, the Committee will continue to make the national parks one of the highest priorities in the Interior appropriations bill. As you know, in addition to the operational increases the Congress has provided, we took on the task of reducing the park backlog in 1998. Since that time, we have provided in excess of \$600 million in additional money for backlog maintenance needs through the operations and construction accounts and the recreation fee demonstration program.

We have also provided an additional \$73 million over the last four years for a new Natural Resources Challenge initiative – a program that was designed to improve the management and protection of the parks' natural resources through inventory and monitoring programs and to mitigate damage to resources and provide funds for sound science.

While funding solves part of the parks' problems, effective management of those resources is equally important. Some examples of areas in need of management improvement are included in a report issued by the General Accounting Office last year. That report indicated

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that the Service spent in excess of \$50 million on domestic and foreign travel in fiscal year 2002. In some cases, travel had escalated over 60 percent over a three-year period. While the Service responded to this report in fiscal year 2003 by reducing travel, \$44 million was spent on travel in that year. While foreign travel has been reduced, there have been over 215 trips to China, South America, Africa, France, Italy and other countries since the beginning of 2003. With the parks facing operations shortfalls, there are clear choices that need to be made.

The Committee has recently become aware of commitments that the Service has made on four large new construction projects, including the proposed construction of a \$100 million visitor center/museum complex at Valley Forge, without any consultation with the Committee. These projects will cost the Federal Government an estimated \$75 million for construction and result in significant increased operational costs. Thus, \$75 million plus a multi-million dollar operational increase will cause a delay in addressing priority backlog maintenance projects and further compound operational shortfalls. We make this point to draw attention to the fact that the Service makes choices every day that impact its parks.

In an effort to provide the parks with the funds that they need to maintain regular hours for the public this summer, the Committee proposes a directed reprogramming. The Service should cancel all foreign travel and significantly reduce non-essential domestic travel, including conferences; freeze employee relocations; defer 50 percent of training requirements and use the \$10 million provided for two Challenge Cost Share programs to cover shortfalls in park operations. In this technology age, the Service should be using teleconferencing and other means of automated communications in lieu of costly travel. In fiscal year 2005 all park foreign travel will require Committee approval. The Committee estimates that these measures would provide \$20 million to \$25 million. If there are other, non-essential expenses that could be used to address the problem, the Service should propose them to the Committee. Diverting funds from critical backlog maintenance is unacceptable.

The parks are a national treasure and the Park Service should not restrict our citizen's ability to enjoy them. Instead, you should properly manage existing resources in order to avoid shortfalls. We suggest that future budget requests should focus on necessary park increases rather than on new and expanded initiatives that come at the expense of park operations and maintenance.

Sincerely,

Norman D. Dicks
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Interior
and Related Agencies

Charles H. Taylor
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior
and Related Agencies