

BACKGROUND: Our nation's public lands continue to be a major draw for domestic and international visitors. Whether they are viewing the Grand Canyon for the first time, hiking a remote national forest trail or visiting President Lincoln's birthplace, there are many opportunities to help show and tell America's story. The National Park System and national forests are the envy of the world, and should be preserved and protected for future generations. The challenge is balancing conservation and preservation with appropriate visitor access so the American people and visitors from abroad can experience our national treasures in ways that minimize our impact on the environment.

Any recent visitor to our nation's public lands knows there are challenges that threaten national parks, forests and historic monuments. And, as a result of resource constraints, there are fewer interpretive rangers and shuttered visitor facilities, which only serve to diminish the visitor experience.

According to the National Parks Conservation Association, our national parks are experiencing a chronic operating shortfall of \$750 million annually. This comes on top of a longer-term challenge of an estimated backlog of maintenance needs that ranges from as little as \$4 billion to as much as \$10 billion. In 2008, the National Park Centennial Initiative was created in order to begin addressing the multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog by seeking higher annual appropriations and attracting investments from the private sector to match federal dollars for specific projects in certain parks.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION:

1. **Provide Adequate Resources for Public Lands:** It is essential that the incoming Administration make a strong commitment to providing the funding necessary to balance conservation with visitor enjoyment in national parks, forests and other public lands. Visitor facilities must be repaired, roads repaved, and trails reconstructed. Funds should also be expended to restore and preserve significant historic sites for future generations to visit and learn our nation's history.

Hundreds of rural "gateway" communities near and around national parks, forests and other public lands are also heavily dependent on visitors for their economic livelihood, so it is critical we continue to encourage visits to these scenic and historic places. As well, we should continue with efforts to encourage visitation to lesser known national parks and other public lands to lessen the stress on more popular parks and introduce the public to areas slightly off the beaten path.

Action Items:

- The new Administration should support increased appropriations for the National Park Service in order to reverse chronic underfunding and better maintain visitor facilities and services while conserving critical park resources.
- The Administration should continue bipartisan support for the National Park Centennial Initiative to eliminate the maintenance backlog in the national parks leading up to the 100th Anniversary of the National Park System in 2016.

2. **Maintain Visitor Access, Broaden Use of Public Lands:** It is critical that open visitor access be maintained so millions of domestic and international travelers are afforded the opportunity to see and experience world-class vistas and historic sites throughout our public lands system. Use and enjoyment should always be balanced with reasonable strategies to avoid overuse of areas, but keeping the welcome mat out in our public lands is critical. It is also important that newly arrived immigrant groups and younger groups of Americans be encouraged to visit and enjoy our national parks and other public lands so that future generations of Americans will be instilled with a desire to protect and preserve these national treasures.

Action Items:

- The new Administration should strive to find balance between open visitor access to public lands and conservation of those natural and historical resources, working with the relevant committees in Congress to carry out this dual mandate.
- The National Park Service and other public lands agencies should create programs to reach out to and encourage newer immigrant groups and younger Americans to visit national parks, forests and other public lands.