

NATIONAL PARK CENTENNIAL CHALLENGE FUND NEEDS IMMEDIATE ACTION

Background:

In early 2007, the Bush Administration proposed a significant effort to prepare our national park system for the centennial of the National Park Service in 2016:

Under the President's National Park Centennial Initiative, this historic multi-year investment begins with the \$2.4 billion national parks budget for FY2008 – including the largest budget ever proposed for park operations and programs benefitting parks. For the first time ever, the national parks' operating budget will exceed \$2 billion in FY2008, an increase of \$258 million over FY2006. The FY2008 budget also proposes three new \$100 million components that could provide up to \$3 billion in increased philanthropic, partnership and government resources over 10 years for park programs and projects.

The first component -- the President's Centennial Commitment of \$100 million in annual federal spending over a decade -- would be used to hire 3,000 more seasonal national park rangers, guides and maintenance workers; enroll more than a million children in Junior/Web Ranger programs; improve landscapes; attract more volunteers; preserve historic structures; and repair buildings. In addition, the President's Centennial Challenge proposal would make available up to \$100 million annually in mandatory funds over 10 years to match at least \$100 million in private contributions for signature projects and programs in national parks.

The Congress is likely to include the requested additional funding in the FY08 budget – with the exception of the Centennial Challenge Proposal. Although the House FY08 budget includes a \$50 million start-up for the Challenge, the program depends upon specific legislation now under consideration in the House and Senate to create the mandatory spending, ten year program. The expected designation of the bill is HR 3094, legislation originally introduced by U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva, with amendments suggested by a broad coalition of park advocacy organizations.

Progress on the legislation has been very encouraging. Although initially adopting alternative strategies to achieve a shared goal of protecting and enjoying our parks, more than 30 key national organizations addressed the issues in detail and unanimously agreed to a package of suggested amendments which has now been shared with Congressional staff and Administration officials. The package deals with matching requirements and project categories and more. Also importantly, the Administration has offered suggestions for offsets for the proposed \$1 billion in new spending, required under Congressional budget rules.

The need is now for action – to have HR 3094 be addressed and marked up by the full House Committee on Natural Resources prior to the Thanksgiving recess.

Messages:

- The Centennial Challenge is an invitation to individuals, non-profits and corporations to share in the preparation for the second century of the National Park Service and the contributions our parks make to protecting special places and meeting our nation's need for mental, physical and spiritual enrichment.
- America's national parks are unifiers at a time when America needs unity.
- Parks can help address key societal challenges like obesity, youth violence, inadequate educational systems and more, especially with the help of Centennial projects and programs.
- The diversity of projects envisioned under the Centennial Challenge – projects that are beyond the scope of traditional agency capabilities – are demonstrated by the certification of 201 projects released by Secretary Dirk Kempthorne in August 2007 and available at: www.nps.gov/2016/assets/files/Eligible-Proposals-2008.pdf
- Additional projects – and even better projects – will be developed and submitted by park units and offices in cooperation with partners. Among the projects the recreation and tourism community will pursue are efforts to increase public awareness of opportunities within our parks, efforts designed to reverse a pattern of nearly two decades of flat and declining visitation to the park system even as the US population grows and the national park system expands.
- The consensus package unites park advocates on a positive future for our parks and encourages the active support of friends groups, concessioners, tourism interests, cultural and historical advocacy organizations and others.
- The offsets suggested by the U.S. Department of the Interior are reasonable proposals that can be refined and revised when the legislation is considered on the House floor. Support for the proposals is indicated by the incorporation of these same provisions in the House-passed FY08 Interior budget. While it is true that certain states may be impacted with a reduction in income from these provisions, it is also true that the same states will benefit from Centennial Challenge programs and projects – and that this same money will be leveraged with non-federal funds and represents a sound philosophy of redirecting receipts from the sale of non-renewable assets to a sustainable asset – parks – with proven economic value.
- ***Our goal is simple: mark-up and approval of HR 3094 by the House Committee on Natural Resources at the very earliest opportunity to include the coalition consensus provisions.***

Actions Needed:

- 1) Demonstrations of support from House Republicans for the Centennial Challenge Fund legislation is critical, including support for the offsets as a beginning point for funding the ten year program.
- 2) Park advocates need to raise awareness of the support for the Centennial Challenge Fund locally, including a focus on the types of programs and projects

that will be funded under the Centennial Challenge. One very powerful way to do so is through op ed pieces by respected local leaders such as that which appeared recently in the Wichita Eagle, authored by Gary Kiedaisch (attached).

3) Park friends groups, concessioners, gateway communities, state agencies and local park officials need to work together to host visits to national park units by Members of Congress to discuss the Centennial Initiative, including possible Challenge Fund projects.

4) While immediate action should be directed at the House, efforts aimed at both chambers will be important beginning in December.

5) Recreation and tourism leaders need to begin discussing now Centennial Fund projects and programs for FY09 and beyond – and securing the matching funds that will either be required or which will secure priority for the available federal funds.