

FEDERAL PARKS & RECREATION BULLETIN #2: February 19, 2008

Dear Subscriber:

The following bulletin from Federal Parks & Recreation newsletter reports on the following:

- * SENATORS PREPARE CENTENNIAL CHALLENGE BILL
- * REC ESTABLISHMENT SENDS ALEXANDER COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS
- * BINGAMAN COMPLAINS ABOUT LWCF BUDGET REQUEST; CONGRESS IN BIND

NOTE: This bulletin is a supplement to your regular edition of Federal Parks & Recreation. It is NOT your regular issue. The next issue will be published February 22.

The Editors

SENATORS CLOSE TO INTRODUCING NPS CENTENNIAL BILL

Four senators are preparing to introduce legislation early next month that would implement a Bush administration \$2 billion Centennial Challenge program for the National Park System, FPR has learned.

The legislation is based on both the administration recommendation and a set of recommendations of a broad coalition of interest groups. Sen. Ken. Salazar (D-Colo.) will be the lead sponsor.

It is understood that Salazar and his cosponsors have settled all details of the legislation except the most important one – budget offsets to provide the \$1 billion of federal money needed to match \$1 billion in partnership money.

The senators are reportedly reviewing a handful of possibilities for producing the \$100 million per year in federal money. Some offsets are familiar such as \$50 million per year for canceling an ultra deepwater oil and gas research program.

Some are not so familiar such as a special postal stamp that would cost more than a conventional stamp with revenues transferred to the Centennial Challenge program. That could bring in as much as \$10 million per year. Still another suggestion would charge oil and gas companies a special fee to pay for inspection of offshore oil and gas drilling facilities. That could bring in another \$20-\$30 million per year.

Expected to join Salazar in introducing the bill are Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.), Sen. Susan Collins (R-Me.) and Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) Alexander has a long record of support for park and rec programs, having served as the chairman of the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, House Natural Resources Committee leaders are also searching for offsets to pay for a lead Centennial Challenge bill (HR 3904) that has been stalled in committee since an Aug. 2, 2008, hearing. Committee chairman Nick Joe Rahall (D-W.Va.) and subcommittee on National Parks chairman Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) introduced the bill.

Rahall and Grijalva have significantly altered HR 3904 to incorporate recommendations from the broad coalition of interest groups called the National

Parks Centennial Network. Craig Obey, vice president for Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association, is the titular lead for the network.

Recent drafts of HR 3904 describe in detail how partnerships would work, what kinds of projects Challenge money could be spent on, insure that smaller parks that lack powerful friends groups are cut in, authorize multi-park and national projects, and authorize the acquisition of private lands with the money. The Senate bill is expected to follow the House example.

The Bush administration came up with the idea of the Challenge program, with Secretary of Interior Dirk Kempthorne the putative father. It is part of a \$3 billion, \$300 million per year Centennial Initiative designed to upgrade the National Park System for its Centennial in 2016. In addition to the \$200 million per year in Centennial Challenge money for noncore operations the program calls on Congress to appropriate \$100 million per year to improve core operations. In the current fiscal year, 2008, Congress complied. The administration has requested another bonus appropriation for NPS operations in fiscal 2009.

Kempthorne told the Senate Energy Committee February 13 that partner groups are eager to provide money for the Challenge. "We have received 321 written letters of commitment from Americans across the country pledging \$301 million dollars of their money for Centennial projects," he said at a hearing on the fiscal 2009 Interior Department budget. He promised the money would "be available to benefit parks all around the country - large parks, small parks and parks in between. We have the goals, we have the projects."

In the fiscal 2008 appropriations bill (PL 110-161 of Dec. 26, 2007) Congress allocated \$25 million in seed money for the Challenge program. (FPR had heard a rumor that NPS was going to announce a distribution of the \$25 million, matched by \$25 million in nonfederal money, February 15. But an NPS official said the announcement won't be made until near the end of the month.)

At the hearing Kempthorne made a pitch for the Senate to act on the Challenge program. "What is needed now is for Democrats and Republicans in Congress to pass the National Park Centennial Challenge Fund Act," he said, referring to an initial version of a bill from the administration. "National Parks are not a Republican issue. They are not a Democrat issue. They are an American issue. Once this legislation is passed, it will be my responsibility to ensure that every philanthropic and public dollar is well spent."

INTEREST GROUPS ASSEMBLE REC COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

An alliance of recreation industry officials, state officials and federal land managers February 8 submitted to Congress a smorgasbord of recommendations for a new national outdoor recreation commission.

The recommendations from Partners Outdoors 2008 include the possibility of beginning the data collection for a commission this year followed by the formal designation of commission members next year by the next administration.

The recommendations also lay out these possible strategies for launching a commission - (1) legislation, (2) White House executive order, or, most intriguing, (3) find an angel such as Bill Gates to sponsor it.

Time is an overarching concern. "A commission that does not begin until mid-2009 would be unlikely to produce results in a timely way for the Administration taking office in January 2009," says the recommendation from the 140 representatives.

"For that reason," it continues, "participants recommended that the commission be created by June 2008 but have two clear phases. Phase One, through early 2009, would focus on information gathering. Phase Two, beginning in early 2009 and lasting through May 2009 would involve development of recommendations." A final product would be submitted to the President (and Congress) in time for the development of the fiscal 2010 budget.

Partners Outdoors delivered its recommendations to Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), who has expressed interest in sponsoring legislation this year to establish the commission. Alexander served as the chairman of the last national panel, the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors (PCAO), in the 1980s.

But Derrick Crandall, president of the American Recreation Coalition and a driving force behind Partners Outdoors, said legislation may be out of the question this year because of the workload facing Congress. "I don't think it would be possible to do unless it was attached to an appropriations bill," he said. "And Congress may end up with a continuing resolution and not allow any amendments (to an appropriations bill)."

Crandall acknowledged that the Partners Outdoors Recommendations, developed at a January 13-16 conference at Snowbird Resort in Utah raises numerous difficult questions for Alexander to answer. "We wanted to give him those options," said Crandall. "I will consult with him privately but at this point we wanted to outline the possibilities."

Other than Congressional action a second option would have President Bush establish a commission by Executive Order. The obvious problem there is political, with a lame duck President setting up a commission that would report to his successor.

A third possibility of a wealthy private sponsor was described this way in the memo to Alexander, "The third option is intriguing and deserves consideration if a suitable and credible anchor can be identified," it said. "One suggestion from the group was for an emissary of the Rockefellers like (activist attorney) Henry Diamond to be enlisted to approach Bill and Melissa Gates, Warren Buffet, or an alternative acceptable source of support."

The Partners Outdoors memo acknowledges that times have changed and the commission should not attempt to simply rework recommendations from PCAO. "Rather, we believe the new commission needs to explore the connections between the Great Outdoors, people and important societal needs including health, education and economic sustainability of communities," Partners Outdoors recommended.

That new agenda would almost certainly emphasize the health benefits of the outdoors in tandem with a need to attract young people to the outdoors. In several instances Partners Outdoors mentions the importance of health and youth. For instance, it identifies a first primary goal this way: "Redefine recreation as a valuable tool in health, education, economic sustainability of communities, national unity and family cohesiveness."

PCAO under Alexander in the 1980s recommended dozens of major strategies to revive park and rec programs. Perhaps most noteworthy the commission recommended in 1987 a \$1 billion trust fund to guarantee money for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

BINGAMAN COMPLAINS ABOUT LWCF BUDGET REQUEST; CONGRESS IN A BIND

Senate Energy Committee Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) took the Bush administration to task February 13 for allegedly requesting too little money for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in fiscal year 2009.

At a hearing on the fiscal 2009 budget for the Interior Department, Bingaman told Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, "Last year I complained that the administration was proposing only \$59 million for the federal LWCF spending, and nothing for the state program. The new budget is even worse – this year's budget proposes only \$51 million for the federal land LWCF program, and proposes no funding for the state program. If approved, this would be the lowest level of spending for land and water programs in the past 40 years."

Congress of course will have a say in allocating money to LWCF this year in an annual appropriations bill. But President Bush has Democratic appropriators in a bind: He promises to veto any spending bill that exceeds his requests. Although Congress may move money around within Bush's caps, they must take money from other programs to provide assistance to LWCF.

Kempthorne has a kind of checkered record vis-à-vis LWCF, at least the state-side program. He has consistently supported the program in public, but under his watch the Bush administration has requested no money for grants for the last two fiscal years. Similarly, the administration has requested no money for nonfederal recreation facility restoration under the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery program.

Kempthorne has at times been bullish about the state side of LWCF. In introducing a report on the fiscal year 2007 accomplishments of the state side program he said, "At Interior, we are striving to assure a future for our children, grandchildren and their children in which they can listen to crickets chirping or see a fox scamper across a field. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is fundamental to achieving this goal by helping to provide these special places where families and children can reconnect with nature and with each other."

The administration did insert a request for \$1.4 million for administration of the state LWCF grant program in a Recreation and Preservation line item, thus keeping it alive. In addition a new program to refer some Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing revenues to state LWCF grants will begin in fiscal 2009. The program will provide \$6.3 million of automatic money outside the appropriations process.

State wildlife conservation grants did better in the budget request. The administration recommended \$74 million, the same as Congress appropriated in fiscal 2008.

The administration has also been tough on the federal side of LWCF at Interior. For fiscal 2009: NPS would receive \$21.8 million, compared to a fiscal 2008 appropriation of \$44.4 million; the Fish and Wildlife Service would

receive \$10.2 million, compared to a fiscal 2008 appropriation of \$34.6 million; and the Bureau of Land Management would receive \$4.5 million, compared to a fiscal 2008 appropriation of \$8.9 million.

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