

WSTPC NATIONAL ISSUES BULLETIN

MARCH, 2008

An e-mail service for members of the Western States Tourism Policy Council by WSTPC Washington, DC, Representative Aubrey King (301.464.8060), who can provide more details on any of the issues reported here. Comments or suggestions are always welcome. New information since the last National Issues Bulletin is in bold.

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Travel Promotion Act

S. 1661, *The Travel Promotion Act of 2007* was introduced June 19, 2007, by Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and Ted Stevens (R-AK). The bill was approved by the full Commerce Committee on June 27, 2007, despite strong opposition from Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) who maintains that international marketing is “not a legitimate Federal role.” No floor vote has been scheduled in the Senate. The bill has 39 cosponsors. A companion bill, H.R. 3232, was introduced July 31, 2007, in the House by Reps. William D. Delahunt (D-MA) and Roy Blunt (R-MO). The House bill was referred to the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Judiciary Committee and the Homeland Security Committee. No committee hearings or markup have been scheduled. Industry efforts have been focused on obtaining additional cosponsors for H.R. 3232, which now has 171 cosponsors. No further action is now scheduled for either bill.

A significant industry effort has been underway for the past year and a half to develop support for two broad goals. In September, 2006, the Department of Commerce's U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board published *Restoring America's Travel Brand: A National Strategy to Compete for International Visitors*. In January, 2007, the new Discover America Partnership (formed in September, 2006, by the Travel Industry Association, the Travel Business Roundtable and other industry corporations) published *A Blueprint to Discover America* to advocate modernizing and securing U.S. ports of entry for more recreational and business travel and a national marketing campaign to increase international visitation to the U.S.

S. 1661 and H.R. 3232 would establish a private corporation to promote and market the U.S. as an international travel destination. The corporation and its programs would be financed by public and private sector funds. The Federal share would be funded by a new fee on visitors from visa waiver countries. The WSTPC worked closely with Senate staff drafting the bill and made several recommendations that were incorporated in the bill as introduced, including a prominent role for state tourism directors, strong representation for rural areas and small businesses, an enhanced role for the new Under Secretary of Commerce for Tourism Promotion that would entail making an annual report to Congress on the facilitation of international travel to the U.S. and a stronger research role for the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries.

The Omnibus Appropriations Bill passed by Congress in late December, 2007, (signed into law as PL 110-61) contained several positive provisions pertaining to tourism but it said nothing about the Travel Promotion Act.

The Bush Administration remains opposed to any new tourism initiatives that would relax what it regards as essential security requirements or require Federal budget support for new marketing initiatives. A particularly difficult issue that has historically split major portions of the industry and remains a challenge is the identification of a stable, long term Federal funding source.

Tourism Development Legislation

The Improving Public Diplomacy through International Travel Act, H.R. 3670, was introduced in the House of Representatives on September 26, by Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA), Jon Porter (R-NV), William Delahunt (D-MA) and Roy Blunt (R-MO). It was referred to the House Energy and Commerce Committee and to the Foreign Affairs Committee. The bill has 21 cosponsors, but with no new ones since November 9, 2007, it now appears dormant.

H.R. 3670 would authorize a \$10,000,000 per year five-year competitive matching grant program to promote international travel to the United States. Grants would range from \$150,000 to \$1,000,000. Beginning with Canada in the first year, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany would be successively phased in during the following years.

Eligible grant recipients are not defined but they would have to match 100 percent of the grant, with not more than 25 percent of the match provided through in-kind goods and services.

Immigration Reform

Although it remains a highly contentious local issue in many communities and in the presidential campaigns and is likely to return to the national stage in 2009, significant immigration legislation appears dormant for 2008 and the remainder of the 110th Congress.

Legislation that would have allowed youthful illegal immigrants to go to college and qualify for citizenship fell short in the Senate in October in probably the last attempt to enact even limited immigration reform in the 110th Congress. The issue of illegal immigration appears, however, to continue to generate passionate debate and there have been a variety of attempts in different cities and counties to enact punitive legislation targeting illegal immigrants. A proposed Administration crackdown on U.S. companies hiring illegal immigrant workers by using Social Security data has been suspended by a Federal judge in California following strenuous objections by an unlikely coalition of civil liberties and business organizations.

The WSTPC has supported comprehensive immigration reform legislation that would provide a legal route for foreign workers to participate in the economy, many of whom provide a vital and stable workforce for the hospitality industry.

President's National Park Centennial Initiative

Bipartisan Senate legislation to authorize and implement the Centennial Initiative is expected to be introduced soon by Senator Ken Salazar (D-CO), Max Baucus (D-MT), Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN). It is expected to combine elements of the Administration proposal and the industry coalition to which ARVC belongs, especially recognizing "increasing visitor enjoyment" as a major purpose of the Centennial Initiative. The latest legislative draft prepared by majority staff of the House National Parks, Forests and Public is expected to be marked up and voted on soon in committee. This legislation also contains elements of the coalition proposals, including a "visitor enjoyment" provision. The main hurdle facing Centennial Initiative legislation is the difficulty of finding an "offset" for the \$1 billion in additional Federal funding that would be authorized.

On February 26th, the WSTPC sponsored and participated in a briefing session on the Centennial Initiative on Capitol Hill for the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus and the National Parks Caucus.

The 2007 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, P.L. 110-61, provides \$125 million in 2008 funding for the Centennial National Park Initiative/Challenge. In addition, in direct response to suggestions by the WSTPC and the National Alliance of Gateway Communities, the Omnibus contains the following language regarding Centennial cooperative agreements: " *SEC. 125. The Secretary of the Interior may enter into cooperative agreements with a State or a political subdivision (including any agency thereof), or any not-for-profit organization if the agreement will serve a mutual interest of the parties to the agreement in carrying out the programs administered by the Department of the Interior; and (2) all parties will contribute resources to the accomplishment of these objectives. At the discretion of the Secretary, such agreements shall not be subject to a competitive process.*" (Non-Federal contributions to such agreements may be "in-kind" or cash.)

SPECIAL NOTE: It must be realized that the Centennial provisions in this appropriations bill only apply to the 2008 Federal Fiscal Year. It remains essential for Congress to enact permanent authorizing legislation to establish an ongoing multi-year program. Authorizing legislation remains stalled, primarily because of an inability to identify nearly a billion dollars in budget offsets to fund the overall program.

The WSTPC continues its strong support of the Centennial Initiative, which promises an historic infusion of funds to maintain and improve national parks and the visitor experience. As a member of an unprecedented coalition of industry and environmental organizations, the WSTPC has been instrumental in securing the coalition's support for legislative language that would ensure that state tourism offices and gateway communities qualify as partners with the NPS in sponsoring centennial projects and other language ensuring that the enhancement of "visitor enjoyment" would be a prime objective of the Centennial Initiative.

The WSTPC also joined in a November 20th coalition letter to Interior Secretary Kempthorne urging that the 2009 NPS budget include an increase similar to the \$250 million increase in the President's 2008 budget to continue the momentum of the Centennial Initiative.

Bills have been introduced in both House and Senate to implement President Bush's National Park Centennial Initiative and hearings were held in both chambers on August 2nd. S. 1253 in the Senate and companion bill H.R.2959 in the House are both "administration bills" authorizing in broad terms the Centennial Initiative as proposed by the President. H.R. 3094, introduced by Representative Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), Chairman of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, and Representative Nick Rahall (D-WV), Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, places more conditions on the source of Federal funding and the purposes for which Centennial Initiative funds can be spent. It should be noted that the Grijalva-Rahall Bill accepts earlier suggestions by the WSTPC to emphasize increased visitation giving priority to greater park use by youth and by diverse demographic segments.

WSTPC comments were submitted for both August 2nd hearings in support of the Centennial Initiative but also urging that: (1) the initiative should more explicitly have as a goal to improve and enhance the visitor experience on the national parks and increase visitation on those lands; (2) the initiative should encourage more interagency collaboration and coordination with other Federal land agencies; (3) the initiative should encourage more intergovernmental collaboration and coordination with state tourism offices and gateway communities; and (4) the initiative should not rely on Federal funding from commercial permit and license fees or on fees paid to other Federal land agencies.

The May 2007 Interior Department report on the President's National Park Centennial Initiative (*The Future of America's National Parks: A Report to the President by the Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne*) follows the major WSTPC recommendations made in the earlier letter to Secretary Kempthorne by the WSTPC and at a meeting with NPS Deputy Director Dan Wenk. Although brief -- more a summary of goals, objectives and strategies -- four goals and examples pertaining to tourism are mentioned as the report commits the Initiative to:

Provide inspiring, safe and accessible places for people to enjoy – the standard to which all other park systems aspire.

Focus national, regional, and local tourism efforts to reach diverse audiences and young people and to attract visitors to lesser-known parks.

Increase visitation by 25 percent at lesser-known parks through a national tourism effort aimed at helping people to discover the breadth of parks and experiences.

Use the Alaska National Parks marketing partnership as a model to reach new audiences and promote off-season visitation.

It must be borne in mind that this is really no more than an initial outline of the CI and the NPS is now evaluating more than 2000 projects and plans that have been proposed for eventual CI funding. Congress will soon have hearings on the CI and will certainly have a hand in shaping the final program.

The WSTPC has also met with key staff of the House Natural Resources Committee to emphasize its support for the Centennial Initiative, while urging them to include in the Centennial legislation they are now drafting, language encouraging the NPS to coordinate projects under the Initiative with other land agencies, with state tourism offices and with gateway communities.

At the request of the Administration, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) on April 30th introduced S.1253 to authorize the Centennial Challenge. Bingaman was careful to emphasize that this bill is just placeholder and that his committee would need much more information about the details of the

Challenge before moving the legislation. The bill authorizes the public-private match for the Challenge as outlined by the President, providing every \$1 contributed by private interests would be matched by another \$1 million in automatic appropriations for the next ten years. Congress will not, however, give the Administration in the expenditure of these funds and insists on a detailed expenditure plan from the Administration.

The WSTPC sent an earlier letter to Secretary Kempthorne urging that the Centennial Initiative utilize state tourism offices in making ultimate investment decisions and that an explicit goal of the Initiative should be to reverse more than a decade and a half of declining visitation to the parks.

The President's \$2.4 billion National Park Service budget for Fiscal Year 2008 called for the largest increase in park operations funding ever proposed and leveraged public-private investments that could generate as much as \$3 billion to help the Parks prepare for their 100th birthday in 2016. The proposed budget included 3,000 new seasonal employees, continues increases for park maintenance and targets specific cultural and natural resource improvements. This initiative started with the President's recommendation of a \$230 million increase in fiscal 2008 over 2007 in park operations funding.

This is described as the first financial infusion for the President's National Parks Centennial Challenge. It pledges \$100 million in discretionary funds for parks each year of this ten-year period and another \$100 million a year to match equivalent donations for signature projects and programs. Combined with as much as \$100 billion in private donations, it could mean \$3 billion for the parks over the next ten years.

The National Parks Conservation Association and other environmental and conservation organizations have strongly endorsed the Challenge but Democratic leaders of the House and Senate Resource Committees have expressed discomfort with such reliance on private sector fundraising to support the parks.

Recreation Fee Program

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has scheduled a hearing on S. 2438, the Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act, for April 15, 2008. Although it is believed that Congress will be reluctant to eliminate nearly \$90 million in fee revenue for the land agencies, the outlook is uncertain and some Congressional changes in the fee program are being discussed by Congressional staff.

Senators Max Baucus (R-MT), Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Tester on December 10, 2007, introduced FREAA, which would, as the title suggests, virtually eliminate recreation fees for all Federal land agencies except the National Park Service entrance fees. No companion bill has yet been introduced in the House.

The National Park Service has begun significantly raising entrance fees to the 147 national park system units that now charge such fees (out of 390 units in the overall

system). Already being implemented, the new fee schedule will increase entrance fees for both vehicles and for individuals entering these park units. For the “crown jewel” parks, individual entrance fees could go to \$12 from the current \$10 and for vehicles, the new fee could be \$25 instead of the current \$20. For other parks, such as Arches, Lassen and Everglades, the fees could double, going from \$5 to \$10 for individuals and from \$10 to \$20 for vehicles.

The NPS has deliberately not made a national announcement about these increases, on the grounds that the original plan called for community participation to see if the fee increases are reasonable and because park superintendents can petition NPS Director Mary Bomar for lower fees.

At the same time, a furor has developed on Capitol Hill and among private sector groups over the amount of the \$80 annual passport announced December 6, 2006, for entrances to the lands managed by the five Federal agencies included in the 2004 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (NPS, FS, BLM, BOR and F&WS). For the national parks, the previous annual pass was \$50.

These fee controversies are occurring at the same time as concern is growing over declining visitation to the Federal lands. For the national park units, visitation decreased about five percent from 1999 to 2006, from 287 million to 273 million.

Final 2008 Appropriations for Federal Land Agencies

The Omnibus Appropriations Bill, PL 110-61, finally provides funding for the Federal land agencies for fiscal year 2008, including the \$125 million in funding for the National Park Centennial Initiative. Following are several salient figures, with the final 2008 appropriation listed first, with the comparable FY 2007 amounts appropriated by Congress in parentheses. (It should be noted that the amounts listed below do not include a 1.56 percent across the board deduction for the entire omnibus bill.):

<u>Program</u>	2008 Approp -- 2007 Approp	
NPS Operations	\$1.971 billion	\$1.719 billion
NPS Operations Maintenance	\$680.8 million	\$640.7 million
NPS Construction:	\$215.7 million	\$313.9 million
NPS Recreation and Preservation:	\$62.9 million	\$54.2 million
National Heritage Area Grants:	\$15.5 million	\$13.3 million
National Forest System:	\$1.5 billion	\$1.456 billion
Forest Service Recreation and Heritage:	\$266.8 million	\$265.2 million
Forest Service Trails	\$77.6 million	\$74.9 million
Forest Service Legacy Grants	\$53.1 million	-0-
BLM Recreation	\$67.9 million	\$61.3 million
National Wildlife Refuge Operations	\$434.1 million	\$382.5 million
Federal Side/Land Water Conservation Fund:	\$131.8million	\$120.1 million

such as a driver's license to prove identify. Early reports did not indicate significant congestion or delays at land or sea ports of entry although the DHS initially implemented a "soft" enforcement regimen with oral warnings given those without the required documents.

P.L. 110-61 included an amendment by Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) that delays until June, 2009, implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative passport identification requirement for land and sea arrivals. (NOTE: The new 1/31 proof of citizenship requirement does not violate the letter of this law because passports are not mandatory if other proof of citizenship is produced.) The Omnibus Appropriations Bill also included language withholding funds from the Department of Homeland Security to implement a passport ID requirement until the DHS reports on its feasibility to Congress.

Continuing the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), since September 30, 2007, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security has been enforcing a requirement that U.S. citizens must have passport identification to fly to Canada, Mexico, Bermuda and other Western Hemisphere countries. Both departments. On January 31, 2008, similar identification will be required at all land and sea ports of entry into the U.S. At that time, U.S. and foreign citizens will need to present either a WHTI-compliant document or a government-issued photo ID, such as a driver's license, plus proof of citizenship, such as a birth certificate. There will be alternative procedures for children under the age of 15, who will only have to present certified copies of their birth certificates. A certified birth certificate will also suffice for children, ages 16-18, traveling under adult supervision with educational, sports, social, cultural or religious groups.

DHS and the State of Washington are implementing a pilot program that will enhance the security of state driver's licenses and "potentially serve as an acceptable alternative document for crossing the United States' land and sea borders." DHS describes this pilot program as "one possible compliance alternative to WHTI requirements."

Facilitation of International Travel: Visa Waiver Program and Ports of Entry Processing

P.L. 110-61 provides \$40 million for DHS's newly authorized "model ports" program; 200 new U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers; establishment of an international registered traveler program and funds for development of a fully automated electronic travel authorization system

On August 3, 2007, President Bush signed into H.R. 1/S. 4 (The 9/11 Commission Act) as P.L. 110-053. The large and complex bill includes several provisions especially supported by the travel and tourism industry:

- (1) Beginning July 1, 2009, it allows the Secretary of State to waive the previous requirement that a country could not qualify for the visa waiver program if its visa

rejection rate for U.S. travel exceeded 3%. The new rejection rate could be as high as 10% provided certain other requirements are met, provided certain security requirements are met by the country in question and that country is cooperating with the U.S. anti-terrorism program. This means that within the next 24 months, leisure travelers from such major tourism markets as Korea, Brazil and Russia could qualify for the visa waiver program.

- (2) The new law also creates “model ports” at the top 20 international inbound airports in the U.S. to focus on improving efficiencies when processing international travelers as they enter the country and authorizing the DHS Customs and Border Protection Service to hire 200 more officers at those airports.

On November 28, 2006, while visiting in Latvia and Estonia, President Bush said that he would try to persuade Congress to add countries to the visa waiver program. Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff later said that in addition to being expanded, the program should be changed to increase security. For example, participating countries might be asked to provide information quickly on lost or stolen passports. No specific countries have been mentioned, but Latvia and Estonia look like good bets. No word, however, about the much larger markets of Brazil, Korea, China or Russia.

The State Department announced on October 26, 2006, that 24 of the 27 Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries have met the requirement for issuing e-Passports, which means all newly issued passports must contain a contactless chip with the passport holder’s biographic information and a biometric identifier, such as a digital photograph of the holder. The three VWP countries that do not satisfy the e-Passport requirement are Andorra, Brunei and Liechtenstein. Travelers from these countries will need to obtain a visa to enter the United States if they hold a passport issued on or after October 26, 2006, until they begin to issue e-Passports.

Federal Highways Final 2008 Appropriations

PL 110-61 sets total funding for the Federal highway program at \$41.216 billion, which would honor the full commitment to capital investments in the highway infrastructure made by Congress in the 2005 SAFETEA-LU reauthorization legislation. Unfortunately, the bill falls short of fully funding public transportation by \$134 million.

The Omnibus Appropriations Bill does not include a provision approved by a House-Senate Conference Committee that would have given some protection to transportation enhancements from State budget cuts. Under the earlier conference committee provision, States required to make future transportation spending rescissions would have had to impose rescissions on all programs equally, which would have prevented States from taking a disproportionate rescission from the transportation enhancements program, as some have recently done.

The WSTPC, through the National Tourism Coalition for Highways, has consistently urged full Federal funding as authorized by SAFETEA-LU for the highway program.

President's 2009 Proposed Highway Budget

President Bush's 2009 budget proposals fall short of full funding for the Federal highway program, as well as the Federal transit program. The 2005 SAFETEA-LU highway authorizing legislation guaranteed \$41.2 billion for highways in 2009, while the Administration provides only \$39.4 billion. The Administration maintains that SAFETEA-LU authorization levels are being met over the entire lifetime of the bill, but this still leaves funding short of the promised 2009 level. Transit programs would be funded at a level \$200 million below SAFETEA-LU authorizations.

Highway Trust Fund Shortfall Looming

The President's budget now estimates a projected fiscal year 2009 shortfall of at least \$3 billion in the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which, because of the nature of highway project obligations, will mean a program reduction of \$12 billion by October 1, 2008. To correct this deficit, the Administration is proposing to borrow up to \$3.3 billion from the Mass Transit Account in the Trust Fund.

Highway financing experts continue to warn Congress that motor fuel taxes to pay for surface transportation programs will soon not meet demand. In August, 2007, the Treasury Department predicted that allocations as projected by SAFETEA-LU would outstrip gas taxes deposited into the Highway Trust Fund by \$4.3 billion by the start of fiscal year 2009.

National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission

The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission released its Report to Congress on January 15, 2008, following a year of hearings and study and was immediately the subject of two hearings by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. The major recommendations of the Commission:

- There must be a strong Federal role and support for a national transportation system.
- There must be a significant increase in investment in investment to preserve our system and modernize it for the future.
- The user fee concept, i.e. the motor fuel tax, is an essential element in providing the necessary revenue support, with 25-40 cents per gallon increase in the Federal motor fuel tax (now 14.5 cents) recommended.

- Transportation enhancements should be subjected to a new Environmental Stewardship Program that would receive seven percent of surface transportation program money. (It is likely that this would result in a substantial cut in transportation enhancement money – a major source of funding for hundreds of tourism projects.)
- The Federal Lands Highway Program should be continued with 100 percent Federal money.
- There would no longer be guaranteed financial set-asides for recreational trails and scenic byways as dozens of individual programs would be eliminated as separate entities and would have to compete for money from the Environmental Stewardship Program and/or other sources.

The National Tourism Coalition for Highways, founded by the WSTPC and other tourism organizations, earlier submitted a statement to the Commission regarding the importance of tourism and the impact of highway policy, stressing the scale of the tourism industry and the critical importance of safe and efficient highways to the industry and the direct benefits of programs such as transportation enhancements, national scenic byways, recreational trails, and traveler information systems.

The Commission was established by SAFETEA-LU to prepare recommendations for the next highway reauthorization legislation in 2009. The twelve member commission was chaired by DOT Secretary Mary Peters but had no tourism industry representatives. Nine of the twelve signed the final report with Secretary Peters dissenting especially from the recommendation for higher motor fuel taxes.

Funding for National Park Service Tourism Office

The WSTPC continues to urge adequate funding for the National Park Service Office of Tourism at the highest levels of the Department of Interior, including the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, the NPS Deputy Director and with key Congressional staff.

It remains a difficult challenge, however, to convince the NPS to fund adequately the Tourism Office. Regional leaders remain resistant to the notion of a stronger national tourism office and appear to prefer handling tourism issues and programs through the regions.

New National Park Service Tourism Plan

The WSTPC continues to urge that the National Park Service adopt the proposed National Tourism Strategic Plan drafted by the NPS Office of Tourism and its National

Tourism Council. The proposed tourism plan outlines concrete steps for the NPS (1) to connect gateway communities, parks and tourism partners to proactively identify and address areas of common interest; (2) to establish and maintain an exchange with tourism and community partners, NPS, the American public and international guests capitalizing on the promise of a high quality experience; (3) to create innovative visitor enhancement strategies; (4) to proactively create expectations of and fulfill high quality visitor experiences; (5) and ensure NPS professional excellence in visitor service.

Snowmobiling in Yellowstone

Acknowledging ongoing litigation, P.L. 110-61 did not include a provision approved by both House and Senate Appropriations Committee that directed the National Park Service to maintain snowmobile use under existing ceilings for the 2008/2009 winter. (The current daily ceiling is 720 snowmobiles, although the actual daily average is about 250.)

The Denver Regional NPS Office on November 20th issued its Record of Decision on winter use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. This is the final administrative step before a long-term winter use plan is developed. The ROD formalizes changes and restrictions on snowmobile access to the Parks. The Final Rule must be issued before the Parks can open for winter use on December 19, 2007

The following key components will be included in the Final Winter Use Plan for YNP to become effective for the 2008-2009 winter:

- Daily snowmobile entries to YNP will be reduced from 720 to 540.
- All snowmobiles entering the Park must be 100% BAT (Best Available Technology) and must be 100% commercially guided.
- Snowmobile and snowcoach travel over Sylvan Pass will be allowed when full avalanche forecasting indicates it is safe.

After the NPS proposed its Winter Use Plan earlier this year, the WSTPC submitted comments on May 31st urging: (1) that the final Plan allow the East Entrance to the Park to remain open under defined conditions; (2) that non-commercial guided groups of six or fewer be allowed; (3) that Adaptive Management be incorporated in determining seasonal and daily entry limits; and (4) that non-BAT (Best Available Technology) snow machines be allowed in limited areas as proposed by the State of Idaho.

Litigation over all these issues continues in two separate Federal District Courts, in Wyoming and the District of Columbia.

New Approach to Funding Emergency Forest Firefighting

House Appropriations Interior Subcommittee Chairman Norman Dicks (D-WA) is trying to find a new source of funding for emergency fire fighting to move away from the practice of drawing money from the overall Forest Service Budget. Both the Western Governors Association (in a February 1st letter by WGA Chair and Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal) and the National Association of State Foresters are urging Congress to enact a budget set-aside for fire fighting so it will not be such a drain on other agency spending.

For more than a decade, the cost of fighting wildfires on Federal lands has been a growing burden on the operating budget of the Forest Service. In 1995, fire fighting costs were about 15 percent of the operating budget, while in 2008 those costs are projected to be nearly 45 percent. The inflation-adjusted average for wildlife fire suppression over the past five years by both the Forest Service and the Interior Department land agencies is \$1.3 billion, which is nearly three times the FY 2001 level of \$472 million. This budgetary pressure has now attracted the attention of Congress and several western senators from both parties. Senators Bingaman (D-NM), Baucus (D-MT) and Craig (R-ID) are also trying to devise an alternative budgetary approach through creation of a separate emergency fund or some other approach.

A New National Outdoor Recreation Commission Proposed

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) is considering introducing legislation to establish a new national study commission on outdoor recreation. Such a commission was recommended at the American Recreation Coalition's 2008 Partners Outdoors Conference. The last such national recreation commission was the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors in the mid 1980s, which was co-chaired by Senator Alexander, then Governor of Tennessee. ARC President Derrick Crandall served on that earlier commission and is a strong advocate of establishing a successor commission that would prepare recommendations to submit to the next President and Congress in 2009.

Congress Asks GAO to Study Moving Forest Service to Interior

House Appropriations Interior Subcommittee Chairman Norman Dicks (D-WA) has asked the Government Accountability Office to study moving the Forest Service and the Environmental Protection Agency to the Department of the Interior to create a new Department of Natural Resources. Although often proposed in the past, this reorganization may now be viewed more favorably as a means to address the budget difficulties encountered by the Forest Service in recent years and the drain of fire fighting costs on that agency's operating budget.