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Report to Congressional Requesters

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PARK SERVICE

Managing for Results Could Strengthen Accountability

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Congressional Requesters

The National Park Service within the Department of the Interior is the caretaker of many of this nation's most precious natural and cultural resources. The agency's mission, as mandated by the Congress, is to provide for the public's enjoyment of these resources while preserving and protecting them for the enjoyment of future generations. The 374 units that now make up the national park system cover over 80 million acres and are estimated to serve over 265 million visitors annually. The park system is continuing to grow and includes a diverse mix of sites, ranging from natural areas such as Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks to urban areas such as Gateway National Recreation Area in Brooklyn, New York, to national battlefields, national historic sites, and national preserves.

In recent years, the Park Service has received increased funding for the operation of the national park system. At the same time, however, many parks have cut back different activities. In light of these conditions, you were concerned about how the Park Service sets priorities and how it decides which activities will be cut back. Accordingly, you asked us to (1) describe the process used by the Park Service to develop budgets and establish operating priorities; (2) determine the limitations, if any, of the agency's priority-setting processes at a sample of parks; (3) determine what, if any, implications the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) has for the Park Service; (4) provide information on trends in cutbacks of visitor services at the parks; and (5) compare funding levels for park operations with those for other federal land management agency operations.

Our work focused on reviewing the Park Service's processes for budgeting and setting operating priorities at headquarters, four regional offices, and four parks.[1] While this sample of park units may not be representative of the system as a whole, our work provides useful insights into the Park Service's priority-setting and budgeting processes.

Results in Brief

While headquarters plays a key role in formulating requests for increases to the Park Service's operating budget, decisions about spending and operating priorities associated with park operating funds are delegated to

[1]The four parks included in our analysis are Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Independence National Historical Park, Olympic National Park, and Yellowstone National Park.

the individual park managers. As a result, the individual park managers have broad discretion in deciding how to spend park operating funds. These decisions have been difficult because, while park budgets have been rising, the costs of operating the parks have also been rising in response to factors such as required pay and benefit increases. As a result, spending decisions made by park managers frequently involve trade-offs among competing demands within the parks for activities such as resource management, visitor services, or maintenance. The most significant limitation associated with the Park Service's decentralized priority-setting and accountability systems is that they lack a focus on the results achieved with the funds spent. According to the park managers we spoke with, regional or headquarters staff rarely, if ever, discussed with them operating priorities or the results accomplished with the funds provided. Key components needed to hold park managers accountable, such as processes for setting results-oriented expectations or monitoring outcomes, are missing. No expectations have been established for the goals that are to be achieved in the parks, and there is no process for measuring progress toward these goals. As a result, the agency lacks a means to monitor progress toward achieving its goals and to hold park managers accountable for the results of park operations.

GPRA offers the Park Service an opportunity to improve its system of accountability. GPRA is designed to hold federal agencies more accountable for their performance by requiring them to establish performance goals, measures, and reports that provide a system of accountability for results. It requires each federal agency to develop, no later than September 30, 1997, strategic plans that cover a period of at least 5 years. The Park Service is currently implementing GPRA and plans on issuing its strategic plan, which will extend through fiscal year 2002, in the spring of 1997. GPRA can also provide the Congress and the Park Service with a powerful vehicle for communicating and clarifying expectations about what the agency can achieve with the funding the Congress provides. Therefore, consultations between the Congress and the Park Service on the agency's strategic plan are critical.

Information is not available from the Park Service to determine agencywide trends in cutbacks of visitor services. Each of the four parks that we visited has reduced its visitor services to some degree over the past 5 years. The extent of these cutbacks varied from park to park. However, the most extensive cutbacks occurred in 1996. For example, in 1996, Great Smoky Mountains National Park closed several campgrounds to park visitors. These conditions are consistent with our past work, which

showed significant cutbacks in visitor services between 1985 and 1993 at 11 of the 12 parks we visited.[2] However, it is important to note that the cuts in visitor services were relatively small compared with the reductions in other park activities, such as maintenance and administration.

Spending on operations by the Park Service has increased in real terms by about 30 percent since 1985. Similarly, the operating budget of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has grown by about 28 percent over the same period. The operating budgets of the other federal land management agencies have grown more slowly or declined since 1985. The Bureau of Land Management's and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' operating budgets have increased by 5 percent and 3 percent, respectively while the U.S. Forest Service's operating budget has decreased by 24 percent.

Background

The Park Service's mission has dual objectives. On one hand, the agency is to provide for the public's enjoyment of the resources that have been entrusted to its care. This objective involves providing for the use of the parks by supplying appropriate visitor services (such as campgrounds and visitor centers) and infrastructure (such as roads and water systems) to support these services. On the other hand, the Park Service is to protect the resources so that they will be unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Balancing these dual objectives has long shaped the dialogue about how best to manage the national park system.

In the past few years, the dialogue about how best to manage the park system has taken on a new dimension. While the Congress and the executive branch have been working under increasingly tight budget constraints, the national park system has continued to expand—35 parks have been added since 1985. In addition, the Park Service estimates that its maintenance backlog, including the costs of general maintenance and rehabilitation to existing facilities and roads, exceeds $4 billion.[3] One of the ways the Park Service has dealt with these conditions is to cut back or curtail visitor services in many parks. These cutbacks and curtailments in services have led to concerns about how the agency is being managed—particularly about how priorities are set within the agency.

[2]National Parks: Difficult Choices Need to Be Made About the Future of the Parks (GAO/RCED-95-238, Aug. 30, 1995).

[3]Agency officials acknowledge that they do not know the precise dollar amount of the total maintenance backlog.

Parks Set Priorities Through the Budgeting Process

Most of the funding for the Park Service is for park operating budgets. For fiscal year 1997, the Park Service was appropriated about $1.5 billion. Of this, about $1.2 billion was appropriated to cover the operation of the park system—including the headquarters and regional offices. About 80 percent of the operating funds go directly to the parks to cover the costs of their day-to-day operations. This operating budget is the primary funding source for any park. At the park level, it is generally referred to as the base budget.

The process for formulating park operating budgets is incremental. This process begins with the prior year's budget as a base and focuses priority setting on requests for increases to the prior year's base budget. Requests for operating increases primarily take two forms: mandatory pay increases and specific increases for individual parks—some for new or higher levels of ongoing operating responsibilities, such as law enforcement, and others for one-time projects, such as the rehabilitation of a historic property. Headquarters takes the initiative in requesting the funding for all required pay increases on a servicewide basis. However, for park-specific increases, the parks compete against one another for limited funds through their regional and headquarters hierarchy. Thus, the formal priority-setting process focuses primarily on marginal increases to last year's budget—not on the priorities of ongoing park activities.

While headquarters plays a key role in formulating requests for increases to the Park Service's budget, decisions about spending and operating priorities associated with a park's base budget are delegated to the park managers. The superintendent—the chief park official—at each of the 374 park units reports to one of several regional directors, each of whom reports to headquarters. However, upon receiving their budget allocation for base operations, the superintendents exercise a great deal of discretion in setting operational priorities. Many of the park officials we spoke with stressed the importance of this decentralized, park-based decision-making structure, under which park managers plan and execute their budget with as little involvement from regional and headquarters managers as possible. Park Service officials at all levels within the agency maintained that park-level managers were in the best position to plan activities at their park and make decisions about priorities and spending on a day-to-day basis. Hence, regional and headquarters officials generally do not get involved in priority-setting and spending decisions for parks. Typically, these decisions involve trade-offs among four categories of spending: (1) visitor services (e.g., opening a campground), (2) resource management (e.g., monitoring the condition of threatened species or water

quality), (3) maintenance needs (e.g., repairing a trail), and (4) park administration and support (e.g., updating computer systems or attending training).

In fiscal year 1997, about 70 percent of the Park Service's operating budget is allocated for personnel services—salaries and benefits of park employees. The remaining 30 percent is allocated for items such as utilities, contracted services, equipment, training, travel, and supplies. As a general rule, the higher the proportion of personnel to nonpersonnel costs, the less flexibility an agency has to reduce costs in the short term when budgets are tight. Further limiting the Park Service's flexibility is the large proportion—93 percent—of staff who are permanent employees. Because so many staff are permanent, the parks cannot reduce costs by reducing the largest component of their operating costs—salaries and benefits—during off-peak seasons. At the four parks we visited, the percentage of the park budget dedicated to salaries and benefits ranged from about 75 percent at Yellowstone National Park to about 85 percent at Olympic National Park.

Park personnel costs will increase annually with required pay and benefit increases and other administrative actions. To the extent that a park's budget does not increase at the same rate as its personnel costs, the park must absorb some or all of the increase in salaries and benefits. For example, Independence's budget increased from $10.42 million in fiscal year 1994 to $10.64 million in fiscal year 1996—an increase of $220,000. However, during this 2-year period, salaries and benefits increased by $376,000 and an administratively required salary enhancement program for park rangers cost an additional $455,000.[4] As a result, during this period the increase in the park's funding did not cover the increase in salaries and benefits, and the park had to absorb over $610,000 in cost increases. Similarly, at Yellowstone, from fiscal year 1993 through fiscal year 1996, the park's funding increased by $2 million while mandatory salary and nonsalary components, such as utility costs, rose by about $4 million—requiring the park to absorb about $2 million in increased costs over 3 years. At Great Smoky Mountains, from 1994 through 1996, the operating cost increases for personnel alone were more than twice as great as the funding increases.

Since park budgets consist primarily of salaries and benefits, absorbing costs can be very difficult without reducing personnel. Parks frequently try

[4]We previously reported that in fiscal year 1994 the Park Service requested and the Congress approved an upgraded civil service classification for rangers.

to reduce spending for training, travel, and some supplies, but these costs are only a minimal part of their budget. In some cases, parks have had to make further cuts to absorb increases, either by not hiring seasonal employees or by not filling the positions of permanent employees who resign or retire. In either case, having fewer workers means that some activities will not be performed. For example, in 1996, Great Smoky Mountains absorbed increases in costs by hiring fewer seasonal staff. As a result, park managers chose to close two backwoods campgrounds for that year because there were not enough maintenance staff to clean and maintain them. Yellowstone also absorbed increased costs in 1996 and had to cut back on a number of activities, including the operation of a campground and two museums. During the same year, Olympic eliminated six seasonal law enforcement ranger positions. According to park officials, this cutback delayed the response time to park incidents. The officials also told us that reductions in resource protection patrols resulted in the accumulation of 50 to 100 tons of trash and litter that washed up on the Olympic coast during the winter months.

Superintendents typically face numerous trade-offs in making spending decisions. For example, in 1996, Yellowstone faced several competing demands—several of which it was not able to fund. Providing the same levels of activities in 1996 as were provided in 1995 would have cost the park about $2 million more than it was provided. The additional costs were due to mandated increases for items such as employee background investigations, employee salaries and benefits, and increased water and sewage testing. To offset these increased costs, the park managers reduced spending for travel, training, and supplies; permitted several permanent and seasonal staff positions to lapse; and closed a campground and two nearby museums. Our past work has shown that such trade-offs occur frequently at many parks in the system.[5]

Priority Setting and Accountability Systems Lack a Focus on Results

Although park managers need flexibility to effectively manage their park, accountability for the results achieved with the funds spent is also important. There is nothing inherently wrong with a decentralized management system or with delegating decisions about spending and operating priorities to park managers. However, the park managers we spoke with indicated that they rarely, if ever, discussed with regional or headquarters staff their park's operating priorities or the results accomplished with the funds spent. Under these conditions, the current

[5]See footnote 2.

decentralized priority-setting and accountability systems lack a focus on the results that were achieved.

Our prior work has shown that a good system of accountability would include elements such as (1) a process for establishing expectations for accomplishments, (2) a means of measuring progress against expectations, and (3) a means of holding managers responsible for achieving agreed-upon progress.[6] Park Service officials told us that park superintendents set annual performance expectations with their regional director and are held accountable for meeting these expectations. However, park officials also told us these agreements generally focused on accomplishing tasks, such as completing a park's general management plan, rather than on accomplishing measurable park goals, such as inventorying and evaluating the condition of cultural resources.

Officials at the four parks we visited indicated that few, if any, reviews of or agreements on their annual operating priorities had taken place between regional or headquarters offices and the park. Officials at the four regional offices responsible for the four parks indicated that it was up to the parks to establish operating priorities and said that they did not get involved in setting park priorities. (These four regional offices are responsible for over 275 park units—or over three-fourths of the total number of parks.) Under this system, key components needed to hold superintendents accountable are missing. Without expectations about the goals that are to be achieved in the parks, a means for measuring progress toward these goals is not in place. As a result, the agency's ability to determine or ensure that the desired results are achieved is diminished.

The parks we visited had a variety of planning documents that described critical needs within each park. However, the documents did not establish expectations for addressing these needs or provide for measuring the progress achieved during the year. Furthermore, the needs described in the planning documents were generally not linked to the budget process or to currently available budgetary resources. As a result, critical issues that are expressed as priorities in planning documents may not be funded when spending decisions are made.

In the current fiscal climate of tight budgets, it is particularly important for a decentralized agency like the Park Service to have a good system of accountability. If a park, regional office, and headquarters agree on

[6]See Managing for Results: Using GPRA to Assist Congressional and Executive Decision-making (GAO/T-GGD-97-43, Feb. 12, 1997) and Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act (GAO/GGD-96-118, June 1996).

expectations, goals, and results and measure the park's progress against these expectations, then the agency will have a better system for holding park managers accountable for how park funds are spent. Furthermore, with such a system, the Park Service would be better able to understand and communicate what is being done and what is being accomplished with the agency's operating funding on a year-to-year basis. Such a system of accountability would be consistent with the goals of GPRA. The Park Service has an opportunity to employ the basic tenets of GPRA to strengthen its system of accountability.

GPRA Provides a Framework to Improve Accountability

GPRA is designed to hold federal agencies more accountable for their performance by requiring them to establish performance goals, measures, and reports that provide a system of accountability for results. It requires each federal agency to develop, no later than September 30, 1997, strategic plans that cover a period of at least 5 years. Beginning with fiscal year 1999, agencies are required to prepare annual performance plans with annual goals that are linked to the goals in the strategic plan. They must then measure their performance against the goals they have set and report publicly on how they are progressing against their expectations. The Park Service has prepared a draft strategic plan that covers the 5-year period from fiscal year 1998 through fiscal year 2002.

Implementing GPRA involves three key steps: (1) setting expectations by developing strategic plans that define the mission, goals and desired outcomes for an agency; (2) measuring progress or performance against these expectations; and (3) using information on performance as a basis for deciding whether progress has been achieved. As strategic plans are developed, agencies are required to consult with the Congress and consider the views of other stakeholders.

GPRA Can Help Improve Accountability Within the Park Service

Accountability for results is especially important for an agency like the Park Service, which sets priorities and develops budgets at the park unit level. Under this decentralized management structure, individual park managers can make decisions about park operations that may or may not be consistent with the agency's mission, priorities, or goals.

By implementing GPRA, the Park Service can improve accountability because each unit of the national park system, each program, and the agency as a whole will be developing long-term and short-term plans

laying out what is to be accomplished over prescribed periods of time.[7] For example, according to Park Service officials, each of the 374 units in the national park system will be required to develop strategic and annual performance plans that state what each park is expected to accomplish. The performance of each park unit will then be measured against its annual expectations, and both the Congress and the agency can then use this information to assess that park's progress towards meeting the established expectations. The performance of the agency's programs and of the agency as a whole will also be assessed using this same kind of process. As this process is implemented, the agency's priorities should become more clearly defined.

By focusing on what is being accomplished and sharing this information with the Congress and other stakeholders, the Park Service can promote a better understanding of (1) the agency's and each park's priorities, (2) the links between the agency's and each park's priorities, (3) the results achieved with the funds provided, and (4) the shortfalls in performance. In short, greater accountability could be achieved because managers would be held more directly accountable for the results of their decisions.

The Park Service Has Begun to Implement GPRA

The Park Service is now in the process of implementing GPRA. In October 1996, the agency issued the final draft of the National Park Service Strategic Plan. This plan includes the Park Service's mission statement, overall goals, and 5-year goals expressed as measurable outcomes that link managers' performance to such outcomes. Since then, the agency has developed and is now implementing a GPRA training program for its employees so that park-level staff can develop measurable goals that tie into the servicewide strategic plan and begin to measure their progress in achieving these goals.

In the spring of 1997, the Park Service plans to issue the final version of its strategic plan, which will set forth its mission, long-term goals, and means of measuring progress towards achieving these goals. Furthermore, in September 1997, the individual parks are expected to establish the strategic and annual performance plans needed to implement the agency's strategic plan.

[7]GPRA requires cabinet-level departments to develop strategic plans. The Department of the Interior has chosen to develop strategic plans for each of its bureaus, including the Park Service. The Park Service, in turn, has asked individual parks to develop long- and short-term plans that tie into its overall strategic plan.

GPRA's Implementation Raises Issues for Consideration

Successfully implementing GPRA can provide the Congress and the Park Service with a powerful vehicle for communicating and clarifying expectations about the agency's mission and long-term goals. Therefore, consultations between the Congress and the Park Service on the agency's strategic plan are critical. As we recently testified, successful consultations (1) include agency officials who have programmatic knowledge and authority to revise the plan, (2) occur after the parties have reached agreement on the depth and scope of the issues to be discussed, and (3) provide an iterative process for improving the strategic plan.[8]

Furthermore, because the Park Service is decentralized and provides broad discretion to park managers, it faces significant challenges in implementing a top-down accountability system such as that called for by GPRA. To fully integrate GPRA's management approach, Park Service managers must begin to define in measurable terms how activities at their park contribute toward achieving the servicewide goals established in the Park Service's strategic plan. In this regard, our prior work has shown that one of the key challenges facing the parks is the development of the baseline data that are needed to measure progress in achieving goals.[9]

Sustained congressional attention to federal agencies' implementation of GPRA would underscore the importance that the Congress attaches to the success of this process. Both the Congress and all executive branch agencies have a large stake in making the legislation work. Successful implementation will provide the Congress and the Park Service with the management framework and much of the information needed to focus on what is being accomplished with the money provided to the agency, make the hard financial decisions dictated by the current fiscal environment, and improve the ability of the Park Service to deliver its services more effectively and efficiently.

Extent of Cutbacks in Services Is Unknown

We attempted to determine the extent of the Park Service's reductions in visitor services over the past 5 years. The extent of such reductions agencywide is unknown because the Park Service does not routinely track data on national trends in the level of visitor services or other activities provided in the parks. Our work showed that each of the four parks had reduced visitor services at various times over the past 5 years. Moreover, as we reported in 1995, reductions in visitor services have been occurring

[8]Managing for Results: Enhancing the Usefulness of GPRA Consultations Between the Executive Branch and Congress (GAO/T-GGD-97-56, Mar. 10, 1997).

[9]See footnote 2.

in many other parks since at least as far back as 1985.[10] In 1995, we reported that there were significant cuts in visitor services at 11 of the 12 park units we reviewed.

According to the Comptroller of the Park Service, the headquarters office does not routinely track cutbacks in visitor services because park superintendents are responsible for managing their park, including making decisions on visitor services, and therefore are in the best position to weigh the trade-offs in reducing operations at their park. Nevertheless, in 1996, in response to a congressional inquiry, the headquarters office attempted to obtain information from park units on such reductions and their effects on visitors and resources for fiscal year 1993 through fiscal year 1996. The Park Service's records indicated that over 50 parks reported significant cuts in visitor services during fiscal year 1996. The Park Service attributed all of the identified cuts to funding shortages. Examples of cuts in visitor services include the elimination of lifeguard services at some park recreational areas, reduced operating hours or the closure of visitor centers, and the closure of some campgrounds.

However, our review showed that some of the data obtained were not accurate and that another attempt by headquarters in January 1997 to obtain updated information on reductions in park operations for fiscal year 1997 produced incomplete results. In the absence of this kind of overall trend information on cutbacks in visitor services, we collected the information at each of the four parks we visited.

All Four Parks Reduced Visitor Services

Over the past 5 years, each of the four parks that we visited reduced visitor services. The extent of such reductions varied among the parks during fiscal years 1993 through 1997, although they were most extensive in fiscal year 1996.[11] However, in considering the amount and scope of cuts in visitor services it is important to consider this information in the full context of overall park operations. Park managers made the cuts in visitor services as part of a broader effort to match park spending with available funds. In each of the four parks, the cutbacks in visitor services were a relatively small portion of the overall reductions in park operations. Most of the cutbacks occurred in areas such as park maintenance, resource management, and park administration. For example, as noted earlier in

[10]See footnote 2.

[11]Fiscal year 1996 featured not only the budgetary pressures from efforts to reduce the deficit but also numerous continuing resolutions and two funding lapses that closed portions of the government, including the national park system.

this report, in 1996 Yellowstone needed to absorb about $2 million in increased costs. Of this amount, $72,000, or about 3 percent, came from reductions in the operations of visitor service facilities, including a campground and two museums. The rest came from reductions in other park operations. Increased operating funds allowed the park to reopen these visitor service facilities in 1997. Although the proportions differ, similar scenarios played out at the other parks we visited.

The following summarizes the cuts in visitor services imposed by the four parks during the most recent 5-year period:

- In 1996, Great Smoky Mountains National Park closed three campgrounds during the winter months and two smaller campgrounds for the whole year. In addition, the park closed one of its visitor centers and staffed two others with uniformed personnel for only 5 hours per day.
- In 1996, Yellowstone National Park cut several visitor services, closing a campground, visitor center, and two museums. In addition, the park did not fund 10 law enforcement positions and eliminated several guided hikes.
- Independence National Historical Park closed several historic buildings to visitors and reduced visiting hours at several other buildings for 3 of the 5 years reviewed.
- Olympic National Park made several cuts in visitor services during each of the past 5 years, including reducing visitor center hours, shortening campground seasons, not opening two entrance stations and backcountry trails, and providing fewer law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs.

Appendix I provides more detailed information on the four parks' cuts in visitor services.

Parks Attempted to Minimize the Impact of Tight Budgets on Visitor Services

Overall, park managers have tried to minimize the impact of operational cutbacks on visitors. According to park managers and records at the four parks we reviewed, visitor services were generally the last areas to be cut. In all four parks, administrative costs for items such as training, travel, and supplies were reduced; maintenance was deferred; positions went unfilled; and other discretionary programs, such as resource management, were reduced before cuts were made in visitor services. Some park managers told us that the services that were cut were selected because their loss would affect the fewest visitors to the parks. For example, at Great Smoky Mountains, three major campgrounds were closed in 1996 during the

winter months—a period of lower visitation. Also, other campgrounds were available both inside and outside the park. A visitation survey conducted at Great Smoky Mountains during the summer of 1996 showed that 90 percent of the visitors rated visitor services as good or very good. At Independence, historic buildings that normally received less visitation were closed or operating hours were reduced so that Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell—the two historic structures that received the most visitation—could operate for extended hours during the summer. At Olympic, park managers told us, the park deferred purchases of supplies and equipment, such as vehicles, radios, and computers, as well as employee training, before cutting visitor services. Similarly, Yellowstone cut supplies and equipment, travel, training, and other administrative activities before cutting visitor services.

Operating Budget Has Grown More for Park Service Than for Most Other Federal Land Management Agencies

Spending on operations by the Park Service has increased in real terms by about 30 percent since 1985.[12] This increase is comparable to the increases for the Fish and Wildlife Service (28 percent) and for federal domestic discretionary spending as a whole (27 percent) but is higher than those for the other federal land management agencies we examined. For example, operations spending by the Bureau of Land Management and the Corps of Engineers increased by 5 and 3 percent, respectively. In contrast, real spending for the Forest Service's operations has decreased by 24 percent since 1985. Table I shows the changes in spending for these agencies' operations from fiscal year 1985 through fiscal year 1997 (estimated).

Table 1: Federal Land Management Agencies' Spending for Operations, Fiscal Years 1985-97

In millions of 1992 constant dollars

Agency	1985	1997[a]	Change
Corps of Engineers	$1,681.5	$1,739.2	3.4%
Forest Service	$1,607.4	$1,215.7	–24.4%
Park Service	$812.5	$1,052.3	29.5%
Bureau of Land Management	$666.7	$702.1	5.3%
Fish and Wildlife Service	$435.9	$557.4	27.9%

Note: Spending is defined as gross obligations.

[a]Obligations for fiscal year 1997 are estimated.

Source: President's budget, fiscal years 1987-98.

[12]To adjust the agencies' spending over the period examined, we used the Gross Domestic Product implicit price deflator developed by the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis.

The increase in Park Service spending reflects, in part, an increase in the agency's responsibilities. From 1985 through 1996, the number of park units increased from 339 in 1985 to 374. In addition, the boundaries of some existing parks expanded, so that total area managed increased from 79 million to 83 million acres. Other additions to the Park Service's operating responsibilities include an increase in visitation, from an estimated 216 million to 266 million visitors per year, plus requirements for protecting newly designated endangered species and for complying with new regulatory mandates, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, and more stringent water quality standards.

During the same period, from 1985 through 1996, the responsibilities of the other federal land management agencies we reviewed also grew (see app. II). The number of wildlife protection units managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service increased from 582 to 702, and the area managed by the agency increased from 90 million to 92 million acres. In addition, the number of visitors to Fish and Wildlife units increased from 24 million to 29 million. At the Bureau of Land Management, while the number of acres managed decreased from 337 million to 264 million, the estimated number of visitors increased from about 52 million to 59 million. The number of acres managed by the Corps of Engineers changed little. However the number of visitors to the Corps' recreational sites increased from 172 million to 212 million. The acreage managed by the Forest Service grew little, and the number of units managed by the Forest Service declined slightly. However, the estimated number of visitors increased dramatically, from 541 million in 1985 to 830 million in 1996.

We gathered this information to provide a gross indication of whether other federal land management agencies were growing as much as the Park Service. Accordingly, caution must be used in interpreting the data on visitation and acreage and in making comparisons across agencies. One official we spoke with suggested that visitation data from the 1980s tended to be inflated and counting techniques varied greatly across agencies and units within agencies. Also, the influence of visitation and acreage on operating costs may vary greatly from agency to agency and from unit to unit within an agency, depending on how the public land is used and what types of facilities are in place.

Conclusions

Balancing the need to protect and preserve park resources for future generations while at the same time meeting the needs of hundreds of

millions of park visitors is, at best, a difficult task. Achieving this balance is made even more difficult by the tight fiscal climate now facing the Park Service and other federal agencies. Managing the national park system under these circumstances requires making choices among competing operating priorities. Within the Park Service, these choices are delegated to the individual park managers and typically involve trade-offs in funding resource management activities, visitor services, or park maintenance. In a decentralized organization that gives managers a great deal of decision-making authority, having a system in place to hold them accountable for the results of their decisions is critical. However, today, the Park Service lacks a system that holds park managers accountable for the results of their decisions. Under GPRA, the Park Service has begun to establish servicewide goals for the park system. The next task will be for the Park Service to begin measuring the individual parks' progress in achieving these goals. Implementing GPRA can both assist the Congress and the Park Service in reaching agreement on goals and expectations for the agency and help hold the individual parks accountable for achieving their goals.

The transition to results-oriented management in the Park Service will be neither easy nor quick. But GPRA's implementation has the potential for improving the agency's performance—a particularly vital goal when resources are limited and public demands are high.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Park Service for review and comment. We met with Park Service officials—including the Associate Director for Operations and the Comptroller. The agency generally agreed with the conclusions and the principal findings of the report and provided several clarifying comments that we incorporated where appropriate.

To respond to your request and agreements reached with your offices, we met with officials from the Park Service's headquarters office and from Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Independence National Historical Park, Olympic National Park, and Yellowstone National Park. We also obtained and reviewed pertinent documentation from these officials. We conducted our review from January through March 1997 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Appendix III provides a more detailed discussion of our objectives, scope, and methodology.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 15 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies of this report to interested congressional committees and Members of Congress; the Secretary of the Interior; the Director of the National Park Service; and other interested parties. We will make copies available to others upon request.

Please call me at (202) 512-3841 if you have any questions on matters discussed in this report. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

Victor S. Rezendes
Director, Energy, Resources,
and Science Issues

List of Requesters

The Honorable Robert Livingston
Chairman, Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The Honorable John R. Kasich
Chairman, Committee on the Budget
House of Representatives

The Honorable Don Young
Chairman, Committee on Resources
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ralph Regula
Chairman, Subcommittee on Interior and
Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

The Honorable James V. Hansen
Chairman, Subcommittee on National
Parks and Public Lands
Committee on Resources
House of Representatives

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Abbreviations

BLM	Bureau of Land Management
COE	Corps of Engineers
FS	Forest Service
FWS	Fish and Wildlife Service
GAO	General Accounting Office
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
NPS	National Park Service

Visitor Services Cut at the Four Parks Visited

Fiscal year	Great Smoky Mountains National Park	Independence National Historical Park	Olympic National Park	Yellowstone National Park
1993	[a]	Nine historic buildings closed to visitors for 3 to 7-1/2 months	Two entrance stations not opened Hours and seasons at visitor centers and campgrounds shortened Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced Trail maintenance deferred	Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced
1994	[a]	[a]	Some improvement, but visitor services such as campgrounds, interpretation activities, and law enforcement patrols operated at the reduced 1993 level	Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced
1995	[a]	[a]	Several interpretative programs cut Visitor center hours reduced Campground season shortened Law enforcement patrols reduced	Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced
1996	One visitor center closed and converted to a bookstore Three major campgrounds closed during winter Two small campgrounds closed Two visitor centers staffed with uniformed personnel only 5 hours per day	Three historic buildings still closed to visitors and operating hours cut in half for five other buildings	Campground season shortened and several campgrounds closed during the winter Many backcountry trials closed Law enforcement patrols reduced	Norris Geyser Basin campground closed (116 sites) One visitor center closed Two museums closed Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced
1997[b]	One major campground still closed during winter	Same cuts as for fiscal year 1996	Law enforcement patrols and interpretative programs reduced	No new cutbacks

(Table notes on next page)

[a]No significant cuts in visitor services. However, during this 5-year period, all four parks reduced other personnel costs, cutting seasonal employees, furloughing permanent employees or cutting temporary employees, and not filling vacant positions. These personnel cuts could affect visitor services.

[b]Cutbacks for fiscal year 1997 are as of March 1997.

Growth in Federal Land Management Agencies' Responsibilities

Table II.1: Visits Reported by Federal Land Management Agencies, Fiscal Years 1985-96

Visits in millions

Agency	1985	1996	Change
Forest Service	540.9	829.8[a]	53.4%
Park Service	216.0	266.0	23.1%
Bureau of Land Management	51.7	59.0	14.1%
Fish and Wildlife Service	24.0	29.1	21.3%
Corps of Engineers	172.3[b]	211.9	23.0%

Note: Caution must be used in interpreting data on visitation when making comparisons across agencies. Officials we spoke with and agency documents noted that visitation data from the 1980s tended to be inflated and counting techniques varied greatly across agencies and units within agencies. Also, the influence of visitation on operating costs may vary greatly from agency to agency and from unit to unit within an agency, depending on how the public land is used and what types of facilities are in place.

[a]Used 1995 data because 1996 data were not available.

[b]Used 1986 data because 1985 data were not available.

Source: President's budget and agencies' data.

Table II.2: Acreage Managed by Federal Land Management Agencies, Fiscal Years 1985-96

Acres in millions

Agency	1985	1996	Change
Forest Service	191.0	191.6	0.3%
Park Service	79.4	83.2	4.8%
Bureau of Land Management	337.1	264.0	–21.7%
Fish and Wildlife Service	90.0	92.3	2.6%
Corps of Engineers	11.6	11.6[a]	0.2%

Note: The same caution that must used in interpreting data on visitation applies to interpreting data on acreage. Like the influence of visitation on operating costs, the influence of acreage may vary greatly. See the note to table II.1.

[a]Small decline not shown because of rounding.

Source: President's budget and agencies' data.

Table II.3: Number of Units Within Federal Land Management Agencies, Fiscal Years 1985-96

Agency	1985	1996	Change
Forest Service	193	185	–4.1%
Park Service	339	374	10.3%
Bureau of Land Management	[a]	[a]	[a]
Fish and Wildlife Service	582	702	20.6%
Corps of Engineers	[a]	[a]	[a]

[a]Data not available.

Source: President's budget and agencies' data.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of our review were to (1) describe the process used by the Park Service to develop budgets and establish operating priorities; (2) determine the limitations, if any, of the agency's priority-setting processes at a sample of parks; (3) determine what, if any, implications the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) has for the Park Service; (4) provide information on trends in cutbacks of visitor services at the parks; and (5) compare funding levels for park operations with those for other federal land management agency operations.

To determine the process used by the Park Service to establish operational priorities and any limitations of the process at a sample of parks, we interviewed Park Service officials at headquarters, at the four regional offices that oversee the parks included in our sample, and at the four parks in our sample. We also discussed with Park Service officials how park priorities are used in developing budget requests and allocating appropriated funds. We reviewed Park Service headquarters and regional office directives, guidance, and practices for identifying operational priorities; Park Service budget documents; and park planning documents.

We visited four parks: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Independence National Historical Park, Olympic National Park, and Yellowstone National Park. As agreed with your offices, we selected these four parks because they (1) include large natural and historical parks, (2) are located in different regions of the country, and (3) reported several cutbacks in visitor services. We also limited our review to four parks so that we could respond to your need for information by early April 1997. Although we cannot generalize the results of our work to all 374 park units, the parks selected are among the most visible and notable in the national park system. Hence, the information collected should provide a meaningful indication of how the park system establishes operational priorities.

To respond to the third objective, we reviewed GAO documents on implementing GPRA and interviewed officials at Park Service headquarters, the four regional offices, and the four parks to discuss how these parks' processes for establishing operational priorities relate to GPRA's requirements and to obtain information on the status of the Park Service's implementation of GPRA. We did not specifically review the Park Service's processes for implementing GPRA.

To obtain information on trends in cutbacks in visitor services, we held discussions with officials from Park Service headquarters, the four

regional offices, and the four parks included in our review and obtained documentation related to this issue. As agreed with your offices, we requested trend information for the past 5 years. Also, because servicewide trend information was not available from Park Service headquarters, we collected data on cutbacks in visitor services from the four parks we visited.

With respect to the last objective, we interviewed officials and obtained budget trend data from the Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE), and the Forest Service (FS). As agreed with your offices, we obtained budget data for fiscal years 1985 through 1997. The budget data consisted of gross obligations for the operations and maintenance accounts of each agency.[13] We adjusted the obligations data for inflation by using the Gross Domestic Product implicit price deflator developed by the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis. We then compared the inflation-adjusted change in the Park Service's obligations over this period with the similarly adjusted changes in the obligations of the other federal land management agencies. We also obtained information that would provide an indication of the growth in the numbers of public visits, acres, and units managed by these agencies.

[13]The budget accounts used were as follows: FS—National Forest System (12-1106); NPS—Operation of the National Park Service (14-1036); BLM—Management of Lands and Resources (14-1109) and Oregon and California Land Grants (14-1116); FWS—Resource Management (14-1611); and COE—Operations and Maintenance, General (96-3123).

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