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Reaching Out

The FY 98 Budget Seeks To Do More Through Partnerships, Regional Initiatives, and Cost- Efficient Management

At right, Patricia Beneke, assistant secretary for Water and Science, and Bonnie Cohen, assistant secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget, explains the President's FY 1998 budget request for the Department at a February 6 news conference at the Main Interior Building in Washington, D.C.

President Clinton's proposed fiscal year 1998 budget of $7.5 billion for the Department represents a modest increase of $462 million, or 6.6 percent over the 1997 enacted budget. It stresses management practices that preserve the nation's public lands and natural and cultural resources while creating a more efficient government and working toward a balance federal budget.

The proposal promotes creative regional partnerships to resolve natural resource conflicts and promote new and ongoing national restoration and preservation initiatives. Priority projects include the Florida Everglades, the Pacific Northwest forests, the California Bay Delta, and the use of innovative Habitat Conservation Plans to protect threatened and endangered species. The proposal also emphasizes a continuing commitment to greater self-determination and self-government for American Indian Tribes.

"This budget recognizes that the federal government must reach out in order to become a catalyst for meaningful change," **Secretary Babbitt** said at a February 6 news conference. "By working hand in hand with state and local governments and the private sector, we can avoid prolonged conflict and develop appropriate solutions for some of the more challenging regional environmental problems."

Regional Ecosystem Initiatives

Restoring the Everglades and reversing the ecological decline of the South Florida ecosystem is one of the most significant regional projects. The budget requests $136 million, an increase of $79 million over FY 1997, and total government wide funding of $331 million for the project. Establishing an Everglades Restoration Fund also is a priority with funding of $100 million proposed in 1998, and each year thereafter until the year 2001.

"Without exaggeration, this undertaking is the most ambitious environmental restoration project in the history of our nation," Babbitt said. "It will demand many years of hard work and a rock solid commitment on the part of the federal government, the state of Florida and many, many other public and private groups to salvage the Everglades and enhance the South Florida watershed."

The budget also requests $203 million to help restore the largest estuary on the west coast of North America—the California Bay Delta. The proposal is an increase of $146 million over the previous year. A consortium of federal, state and local agencies and other parties are developing long-term comprehensive strategies to solve the complex and interrelated problems in the Bay-Delta ecosystem. The region is critical to California's economy, providing water to two-thirds of all homes and businesses in the State and irrigating more than four million acres of farmland.

The President's Forest Plan, now into its fifth year of operation, has been a key component in helping state and local governments preserve old growth forests while allowing the administration to meet its timber harvest production. The budget funds the Forest Plan at $71 million, an increase of $3 million from the 1997 enacted level.

The development of Habitat Conservation Plans to protect threatened and endangered species has been an extraordinary example of how creative partnerships result in successful solutions, protecting species while allowing economic development to proceed. From 1983 to 1992 only 14 of these plans were approved. By the end of 1997, the Department projects that 300 of them will be in place or under development. The budget continues to fund $6 million for land acquisition grants to states to support these plans.

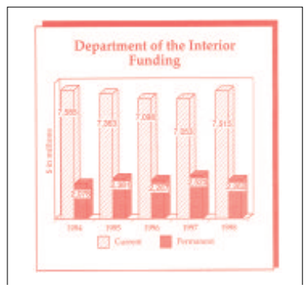
Natural and Cultural Resources

The funding increases requested for Interior's land management bureaus will enable them to improve deteriorating infrastructure and operational conditions in parks, refuges, fish hatcheries, and on public lands that threaten the preservation of our priceless natural and cultural resources.

The budget requests $1.6 billion for the National Park Service, which manages 374 parks. Priorities include funding for five new parks created last year, the establishment of the Presidio Trust as a public-private partnership, a Vanishing Treasures initiative that will focus on endangered Native American historic sites on the Colorado Plateau, and start up funds for nine new heritage areas. The Park Service budget also includes $24.9 million for land acquisition and construction to restore the native anadromous fish on the Elwha River in Olympic National Park.

A paramount concern for the Fish and Wildlife Service is continuing its work on a sound and workable Endangered Species Act that is flexible enough to adequately protect species while minimizing adverse economic impacts whenever possible. The budget requests $688 million for the Service, including $79 million for the Endangered Species Act program. Other priorities for the Service, which manages 509 wildlife refuges, include improving refuges and wildlife habitats, and expanding recreation and education opportunities for the 29 million visitors to the refuges each year.

For the Bureau of Land Management, which has responsibility for 264 million acres of public lands, the budget requests $1.1 billion. Among the bureau's top priorities are managing the newly designated Grand Staircase-Escalate National Monument, and completing badly-needed facility maintenance and infrastructure and trail repairs at high-use recreational sites and areas of cultural importance. With 1996 being the largest wildfire year in three decades, BLM's budget also addresses an increased need for fire preparation and management. A $28 million increase is proposed for the wildland fire management program. Working with the Forest Service, the program will emphasize the reduction of fuels and the use of prescribed fires to solve the wildland fire problem.



INTERIOR STAFFING	Base 1993	Actual 1996	Targets 1997	Targets 1998	93 to 98 Change
Interior FTEs	77,937	66,704	69,684	70,291	-7,646
Add'l seasonal employees			+945	+1,113	+1,113
Total, Interior FTEs	77,937	66,704	70,629	71,404	-6,533

The administration remains committed to providing additional revenue to parks, refuges, and public lands through user fees, better collection practices, and reform of Park Service concessions.

Science for Sound Decision Making

The budget requests $745.4 million for the Department's premier science agency, the U.S. Geological Survey, which continues to carry out scientific research in the natural and biological sciences that contributes to the improvement of the health and welfare of the American people.

The budget would allow the agency to address several new challenges, including a national initiative announced by President Clinton last August which would protect communities from toxic pollution by the year 2000. The USGS will work with other agencies to improve Americans' right to know about the condition of municipal water supplies in metropolitan communities. Data from major rivers, drinking water wells, and water supply watersheds will be made available to the public through a variety of distribution methods including the World Wide Web.

Other innovative USGS science projects include participation in a global seismic monitoring program; a 3-year program to establish historic mapping and modeling databases for several major cities, and additional support for land and resource managers in the area of biological research.

The Priorities of Indian Tribes

The budget requests $1.7 billion, an increase of $127 million over 1997, for Native American programs. The budget recognizes the critical needs of the Tribes, particularly local reservation programs such as housing repair for needy families, adult vocational training, law enforcement and infrastructure repair, as well as additional funds for the 185 schools for Indian children.

Over the past three years, BIA has eliminated more than 2,500 full time positions and kept administrative costs among the lowest in the federal government, consistently providing 90 percent of the operating budget to education and reservation-based programs.

Reform of Indian trust fund management continues to be a high priority in 1998, with $39 million requested for the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians. About $16.7 million of that is targeted for trust fund management improvements, which will help ensure that the federal government fulfills its responsibilities to properly account for, invest, and maximize the return on all Indian trust money.

More detailed descriptions of fiscal year 1998 proposed budgets for bureaus and offices are on the agencies' news pages of this issue.

Yosemite:

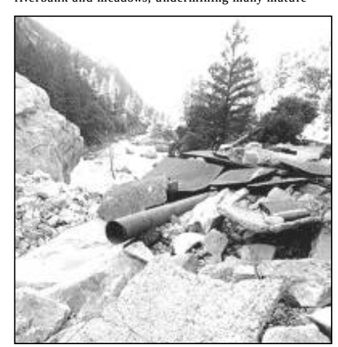
Reopening, Rebuilding, Reinventing

The National Park Service reopened Yosemite Valley to visitors this month, for the first time since New Year's floods swept the area, damaging buildings, utilities, campgrounds, and trails. And as the recovery effort continues to restore this jewel of the park system, park officials point out that the flood created an opportunity to also provide greater long-term protection for Yosemite's priceless natural resources.

Highway 41, which enters Yosemite National Park from the south, and Highway 120, which enters from the north, were set to reopen March 14 for private vehicles and tour buses. But Highway 140, which enters the park's western perimeter from the gateway community of El Portal, will remain closed to private vehicles at least until Memorial Day. A shuttle bus will bring visitors from El Portal into the park. The reduced traffic on 140 will allow repair crews to work without interruption on the damaged road.

Officials have already reopened the Wawona area in the southern section of the park, the Badger Pass Ski Area for cross-country skiing, and Crane Flat on the park's western edge. In the valley, overnight accommodations will be available at the Ahwahnee, Yosemite Lodge, and Curry Village, which were not affected by the flooding. Limited camping also will be available in the valley, but the Upper River and Lower River Campgrounds and the Group Camp will not open this summer.

Record flooding on January 1-3 shut down the 750,000-acre park, which is situated in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains. A tropical ârain storm combined with an early, heavy snowpack caused a torrential runoff into the Merced River, which courses through the valley. It was the greatest flood in the park since 1955. The deluge damaged more than 400 visitor cabins and motel rooms, more than 200 employee quarters, and almost half of Yosemite's 900 campsites. It washed out roads and trails, damaged power, water, and sewer lines, knocked out or obstructed dozens of bridges, and eroded miles of riverbank and meadows, undermining many mature trees in developed areas. The park's preliminary assessment estimated that at least $178,053,000 would be needed for repairs and rehabilitation.



The major costs include $84 million for buildings; $36.3 million for roads; $13.4 million for short-term emergency response efforts; $13.1 million for work on the grounds, including rebuilding and refurbishing campgrounds and trails; $6.1 million for utilities; $5 million for natural and cultural resources; $4.3 million for trails; and $2.8 million for lost or damaged property. Eighty percent of the park situated above 6,000 feet could not be surveyed because of snow cover. After observations from aircraft, officials estimated damage to "high country" facilities and resources at $12.9 million.

Most of the recovery costs will have to be appropriated by Congress and California representatives have introduced legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives to provide these funds.

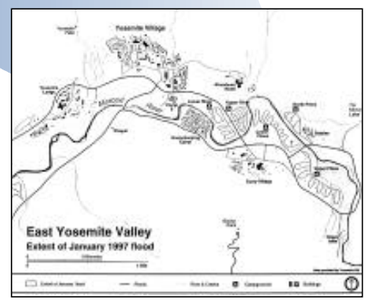
About 1,000 workers from nearby communities lost work because of the flood, according to park concessionaires, who estimated they lost about $150,000 a day in business. Yosemite annually receives 4.1 million visitors and generates $2.1 billion in economic benefits. Mariposa County, which receives half of its $12 million annual revenue from park hotel occupancy taxes, expects to have lost $500,000 in taxes by mid-March.

Though devastating to the park's infrastructure and painful for park communities and employees, the New Year's flood was not a disaster for the park itself. Flooding is a natural aspect of Yosemite, which remains intact and as beautiful as ever, park officials point out. The flood even has a positive side, because the recovery effort provides park managers an opportunity to carry out many of the recommendations of Yosemite's General Management Plan.

"The key to rebuilding intelligently is learning from the flood," said B. J. Griffin, park superintendent. "Yosemite is in the rare position of seeing its 1980 General Management Plan proved correct," Griffin told news reporters at a briefing. "More importantly, the flood accelerated the plan's timetable."

The plan, which has widespread community and national support and guides the recovery effort, calls for relocating employee quarters, tourist cabins, shops, offices, parking lots, and some campsites from the valley floor—the floodplain of the Merced—to more protected and suitable locations. This can now be done at minimal additional cost—minimal when compared with rebuilding in the floodplain now and relocating the facilities in the future.

"Buildings and campgrounds constructed in the flood zone will be replaced in scale, scope, and function, but relocated away from the flood zone," Griffin explained.

The park plan calls for expanded bus service and-or other regional transportation programs to reduce the number of private vehicles in the park. On the summer's busiest days, as many as 17,000 visitors and 6,000 cars are in the park. Parking had been available for 1,400 cars, but the flood destroyed or damaged major lots, leaving considerably less space. These circumstances have forced park officials to develop an Emergency Vehicle Day Use Reservation System for the 1997 summer season. By late spring, Yosemite will require visitors to make reservations before driving their vehicles into the park. "We must get the cars out of Yosemite Valley if it is to remain the crown jewel that has inspired millions of American families," Griffin said.

Yosemite officials praised the expert and rapid help provided by government disaster assistance teams, including California's Interagency Type I Incident Management Team, the NPS Type I All Risk Management Team, and NPS Type II Team, the Federal Lands Highway Program, and Interior's Denver Service Center.