

NPS RETIREES: INTERNAL MEMOS REVEAL PUBLIC TO BE MISLED ON PLANNED NATIONAL PARK CUTS, EVEN AS PUSH FOR MORE VISITORS LAUNCHED

Employees Coached to Misdemean News Media About Cuts to Avoid “Chambers Treatment”; Among Likely Service Cuts: Lifeguards on Summer Beaches, Visitor Center Shutdowns.

WASHINGTON, D.C.//March 17, 2004///Even as the Department of Interior’s National Park Service (NPS) kicked off a major national campaign last month with the U.S. travel industry to increase visitors to national parks, the federal agency was quietly passing along instructions to park superintendents to further reduce park maintenance and services, such as lifeguards on summer beaches and visitor center operations on Sundays and holidays, according to internal NPS memos made public for the first time today by the nonpartisan Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees. The memos also reveal how NPS coached park superintendents on how to mislead the news media and public about the service cuts in order to avoid both “political controversy” and making the same kind of budget-related statements that led to the controversial ouster in December 2003 of U.S. Park Police Chief Teresa Chambers.

The NPS memos are based on a February 17, 2004, meeting of NPS deputy regional directors convened by NPS Deputy Director Randy Jones, a top lieutenant to National Park Service Director Fran Mainella. The Jones meeting took place less than two weeks before the February 25, 2004, launch of the “See America’s National Parks” involving NPS and the Travel Industry Association of America (TIAA). The “See America’s National Parks” campaign is designed to boost sagging visitation numbers at national parks.

Denny Huffman, former superintendent of Dinosaur National Monument and spokesperson for the Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees, said: **“The Bush Administration, Department of Interior and the National Park Service simply can’t have it both ways. You can’t engage in large-scale efforts with the travel industry to ramp up visitors to the park and then at the same time pressure superintendents to cut service. The only possible outcome from reduced operations of parks that already are critically far behind in needed maintenance is a reduced quality in the visitor’s experience. If you support the parks and you want more visitors, you have to be prepared to fix the problems and improve services – not the exact opposite of that, which is what we are seeing happen today.”**

Jeff McFarland, executive director, Association of National Park Rangers, said: **“The Park Service is telling the public, the media, and the Congress that everything is fine ... that promises are being kept ... and don’t look too closely. And, in the process, Park Service professionals are expected to present information to the public and the media in a manner that closely reflects current administration policy rather than actual needs. The recent removal of the chief of the U.S. Park Police sent a clear message to park superintendents – you may lose your job for telling the truth about your park budgets. As stewards of many of our nation’s most precious natural and cultural resources, we believe that national parks and the American people deserve better than this. The national parks do not belong to the federal government. They belong to the American people. Good stewardship includes honestly apprising the public of the condition of the parks. It also means apprising them of the services that will be available to them when they arrive at our parks and why certain services may not be available. Finally, the mission of the Park Service – to enable our children and grandchildren to enjoy the full splendor of our national parks – at our present level of effort, simply will not happen.”**

Teresa Chambers was forced onto administrative leave as chief of the U.S. Park Police on December 5, 2003, after she told media outlets that the Park Police had been forced to cut back on patrols. She also said her department was undergoing a \$12 million budget shortfall and needed \$8 million for the next fiscal year.

When she was pushed out of her position, Chambers was accused by the Bush Administration of breaking a federal rule against public comment on budget discussions and another supposedly barring someone in Chamber’s position from lobbying.

The NPS internal memos were released today at a Washington, D.C., news conference made possible by the nonprofit Campaign to Protect America’s Lands.

ABOUT THE MEMOS

One of the regional memos based on the instructions provided on February 17, 2004, by National Park Service Deputy Director Randy Jones reads as follows: “He (Jones) has asked each region to review the ‘service level adjustments’ of each of their parks and then communicate to him those that are the most sensitive. We will need to be sure that adjustments are taken from as many areas as is possible so that it won’t cause public or political controversy ...” Among the possible cuts listed in the memo are the following: “close the visitor center on all federal holidays, eliminate life guard services at ... guarded beaches, eliminate all guided ranger tours ... (and) close the park every Sunday and Monday.”

Distributed internally just four days before the tourism-promotion pact between NPS and the TIAA, the same NPS memo provides guidance to park superintendents about how to mislead the media about the cuts, in an apparent attempt to give career NPS employees a roadmap as to how to avoid the fate of Teresa Chambers, who was put on administrative leave by the Bush Administration after revealing similar budget cuts. The memo reads: “We also discussed how each park would communicate with and inform your local constituents about your plans ... He (Jones) suggested that if you feel you must inform the public through a press release on this years (sic) hours or days of operation for example, that you state what the park’s plans are and not to directly indicate that ‘this is a cut’ in comparison to last year’s operation. If you are personally pressed by the media in an interview, we all agreed to use the terminology of ‘service level adjustment’ due to fiscal constraints as a means of describing what actions we are taking.”

The emphasis on service cuts in the Northeast regional memo is in keeping with comparable memos sent to park superintendents in other parts of the United States. For example, the memo to Midwest park superintendents reads in part: “As we emphasized in the zone meetings, we are at a point where we can no longer be ‘doing more with less.’ The realization should now be clear to everyone that we are crossing the line into new territory where we hope to rationally and objectively choose the best things to do and not to do. The key is deciding on those things we need to eliminate and to be able to effectively support those decisions based on hard facts and figures ... We fully understand that getting to these goals will not be easy and will likely take sometime to achieve/implement. It will require sacrifice and adaptability both on the part of you, as managers, and all our employees.”

One sign of what most national parks may see during the summer of 2004 already has been evident in the impact of service and maintenance cuts at Everglades National Park, which has just completed its main season. At Everglades, it is reported that 20 percent of permanent staff positions were left empty, nearly half of the

permanent positions in the interpretation division (the staff that interacts directly with the visiting public) went unfilled, and no evening programs were held for park visitors. And the problem is not confined to the Everglades: In the Northeast United States, it is estimated that 68 of 74 parks will have a smaller budget for park operations this year than in 2003.

Roughly two weeks prior to the Jones meeting, NPS Director Mainella was quoted on February 2, 2004, as saying: "The 2005 budget request for the National Park Service represents the President's determination and strong commitment to reducing the park maintenance backlog, preserving park resources and improving the visitor experience in our parks and special places." (See <http://nps.seeamerica.org/pmgr?sect=release&releaseId=2> on the Web.)

On January 22, 2004, the Coalition of Concerned National Park Services Retirees sent President George Bush a letter expressing grave concerns that "actions are being taken in the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service that are short-changing, ignoring or violating the long-standing legislation and policies comprising the mission of the National Park Service." The unusual letter urges President Bush to halt efforts at the Interior Department, which oversees the NPS, to strip out its "conservation" mandate and, instead, to codify existing rules that already should make that mandate a top responsibility for the Department. The Coalition letter reads: "President Bush, now is the time for you to step up to the commitments of stewardship you have made and to which your Party has historically embraced: ensuring that the natural beauty and cultural legacies treasured by all Americans are protected and preserved for generations to come."

ABOUT THE GROUPS

The Coalition of Concerned National Park Retirees is a group of more than 220 retired park service officials who have publicly criticized the Bush Administration's approaches to maintaining national parks. Consisting of non-political career NPS employees, the Coalition includes several former directors, deputy directors, and regional directors and nearly 70 former superintendents or assistant superintendents. Together, the members of the Coalition represent well over 6,000 combined years of park experience under administrations from both political parties.

The Association of National Park Rangers (ANPR) is an organization created to communicate for, about, and with park rangers; to promote and enhance the park ranger profession and its spirit; and to support the management and perpetuation of the National Park Service and System. In meeting these purposes, the association provides education and other training to develop and improve the knowledge and skills of park rangers and those interested in the profession; provides a forum for discussion of common concerns of park rangers; and provides information to the public. ANPR's membership is comprised of individuals who are entrusted with, and committed to, the care, study, explanation, and protection of those natural, cultural, and recreational resources included in the National Park System, as well as of individuals who support these efforts.

The Campaign to Protect America's Lands (CPAL) conserves our natural and historical heritage by exposing policies that permit destruction of our parks and public lands for private profit. The Campaign to Protect America's Lands is a non-profit, non-partisan organization. CPAL also publishes "Land Line," a weekly investigative newsletter focused on public lands issues. Visit CPAL on the Web at <http://www.protectamericaslands.org>.