

# WSTPC NATIONAL ISSUES BULLETIN

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*An e-mail service for members of the Western States Tourism Policy Council by WSTPC Washington, DC, Representative Aubrey King (202.251.6845), who can provide more details on any of the issues reported here. Comments or suggestions are always welcome.*

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This first issue of the WSTPC National Issues Bulletin is essentially a preview of selected national public policy issues with an impact on tourism and recreation in the West that are likely to receive significant attention by the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress and the second Bush Administration.

## **National Recreation Policy Act**

The WSTPC has been working with the American Recreation Coalition and other recreation industry organizations to draft and advocate a National Recreation Policy Act. This would establish for the first time a national commitment to development of a recreation policy for the country. The bill itself would make no substantive changes in recreation policies or programs, but it could result in a sea change in the emphasis given to recreation on the Federal lands. It would accomplish three major goals:

- (a) It would “declare a national policy regarding the management and use of lands and waters administered by Federal agencies to provide the American public with abundant, high-quality and diverse recreational opportunities to enhance (1) public health and welfare, (2) appreciation of natural resources and the environment, and (3) economic benefits associated with outdoor recreation for gateway, rural and other communities;”
- (b) It would direct the Secretary of the Interior to lead an interagency effort to prepare within 12 months “a national recreation strategy that identifies statutory and regulatory impediments to providing and facilitating a diversity of recreational opportunities on Federally-managed lands and waters, and appropriate means to increase the quantity and quality of recreation opportunities available to the public;” and

- (c) It would establish an ongoing Federal Recreation Inter-Agency Coordinating Council, with state and local government officials and others from the industry as advisors, to improve coordination of recreation programs and policies and implement the national recreation strategy.

On February 9<sup>th</sup>, the WSTPC is joining other industry organizations in explaining this significant legislation to key staff on Capitol Hill. Resistance is expected from environmental organizations that will object to the emphasis this legislation gives recreation and perhaps from some Federal land agencies that do not see recreation as a major part of their mission.

### **Travel and Tourism in Homeland Security Policies**

With other industry organizations, the WSTPC is actively working with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure efficient and expeditious implementation of the new statutory directive from the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress that the Special Assistant to the Secretary for the Private Sector, who reports directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security, must take responsibility for coordinating and consulting on issues related to the travel and tourism industries with the DHS Directorate of Border and Transportation Security, the DHS Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness and the Department of Commerce Assistant Secretary for Trade Development. The WSTPC was one of the half dozen major tourism organizations that successfully lobbied for passage of this provision.

Following a December 20, 2004, meeting with DHS Special Assistant Alphonso Martinez-Fonts, Jr., the WSTPC, along with the Southeast Tourism Society, the National Tour Association, the American Bus Association and the American Society of Travel Agents, all of whom had also worked to get this provision enacted, have jointly drafted and submitted a white paper outlining a proposed working relationship between DHS and this Tourism Industry Coalition. The Coalition says it is particularly interested in issues regarding nationwide or regional security alerts, passports and substitutes thereof, transportation security (such as Secure Flight), facilitation of international travel (visas, USVISIT, biometric identification, etc.) crowd management issues (especially at national park sites and theme parks), and all other aspects of DHS policies and practices that could impact travel demand and cost of services. Without specifying the exact mechanics of future interaction with DHS, the Coalition expresses particular interest in opportunities to give input on issues prior to their “hardening” into proposed or final policies and practices. The Coalition then promises that the industry can more readily become supporters and advocates for those policies and practices and help educate and prepare the public.

### **President’s Budget**

As expected, the President’s Proposed Budget for the 2006 fiscal year is very tight. Overall, the President’s Budget would eliminate or reduce 150 programs and hold non-homeland security discretionary spending flat for the next five years – the deepest

domestic reductions proposed since the Reagan era – as part of a declared effort to cut the Federal deficit in half by 2009.

Following are selected highlights from the proposed budget regarding public lands and transportation programs especially important to tourism and recreation:

Public Lands: On the bottom line, the administration budget recommends a net decrease for the Interior Department and Forest Service of \$500 million, from \$20.2 billion in FY 2005 to \$19.7 billion in FY 2006. No grant money is recommended for the state side of the *Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)*, which had a final 2005 appropriation of \$89.7 million and the *Urban Park and Recreation* program would again also receive no Federal funding, as in 2005. The Federal side of LWCF would be cut \$9 million.

With the foregoing as background, Federal lands budgets do not fare badly in the 2006 administration proposal. *National Park Service Operations* are proposed to increase a substantial \$50.5 billion, from \$1.684 billion in 2005 to \$1.734 billion in 2006. *NPS Operations Maintenance* would increase from \$582.7 million to \$595.6 million. *NPS Construction* would increase from \$302.2 million to \$324.4 million. *NPS Recreation and Preservation/Heritage Areas* would be sharply cut from \$61 million in FY 2005 to \$36.8 million, but this cut in funding for heritage areas has become an annual charade where Congress has always restored heritage area money. The proposed budgets for outdoor programs on the other Federal lands are essentially flat. The *National Forest System* is cut \$30 million, from \$1.40 billion to \$1.37 billion, with *Forest Service Trails* cut \$12 million from \$75.7 million to \$63.8 million, while *Forest Service Recreation Management* would stay essentially the same at \$257.3 million. *National Wildlife Operations* would be increased \$13 million, from \$381 million to \$394 million. *BLM Recreation* would have a small jump of \$4 million, from \$60.6 million to \$64.6 million. *Corps of Engineers Operation and Maintenance* would increase \$20 million, from \$1.959 billion to \$1.979 billion.

Transportation: FY 2006 highway spending in the President's budget would be flat, rising only one percent over FY 2006, while action is awaited (hopefully) on passage of reauthorization legislation overdue since October 1, 2003 (see reauthorization story below). Airport construction would be cut \$472 million from \$3.5 billion to \$3.03 billion. Funding for Amtrak would be eliminated. The budget proposes to eliminate Amtrak subsidies. No funds are requested for subsidy grants to Amtrak for FY 2006 (the railroad has been receiving about \$1.2 billion per year). Instead, \$360 million is provided to the Surface Transportation Board to assume Amtrak's responsibilities for operating some commuter rail systems under contract.

### **Air Ticket Tax Increase Proposed**

The proposed Federal budget would more than double the per-flight ticket tax to \$5.50 from the present \$2.50, with an \$8 cap on one-way trips and a \$16 cap on round-trip charges. This fee is dedicated to paying the cost of homeland security related to air travel

and the Administration says it is designed so that those who use air travel the most pay the most for security but the Air Transport Association says it is unclear whether the additional money would improve airport security because the budget does not increase spending for the Transportation Security Administration.

### **Reauthorization of Federal Highway Program**

After 16+ months and six different Congressional extensions, the outlook is brightening somewhat for enactment of a six year reauthorization bill. President Bush's 2006 budget assumes funding for highway reauthorization at \$299 billion in contract authority and \$284 billion in "guaranteed funding" – the same level House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-CA) claimed last fall the Administration would accept as a compromise. The White House never officially confirmed or denied Thomas' assertion so the budget proposal represents a significant increase from the previous \$256 billion Administration reauthorization proposal and is very close to what the House and Senate are targeting as the appropriate funding levels for a six year reauthorization.

Although Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman James Inhofe (R-OK) and most of the members of his committee signed a letter last week to the President asking for the \$311 billion funding level passed by the Senate in 2004, Inhofe has acknowledged that the final reauthorization bill will probably be closer to the \$299/\$284 billion level. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has introduced H.R. 3 as a six-year highway and transit funding bill at the \$299/\$284 billion level. It is expected to be marked up by the full T & I Committee within the next two weeks and be on the House floor in early March.

For a reauthorization bill to succeed, major challenges will still have to be overcome, with the major hurdle probably being achieving the funding levels desired by Congress while ensuring that both donor states (who pay more into the highway trust fund than they receive Federal highway payments) and donee states (who receive more than they pay in) receive increased funding. A further problem is the sharp growth in demonstration projects, which have mushroomed from less than two dozen thirty years ago to more than 5,000 today. Now consuming nearly 20% of highway expenditures, these demonstration projects reduce flexibility to meet other highway goals.

The current extension of TEA-21 continues until May 31, 2005.

### **Biometric Passport Requirement**

By October 1, 2005, all visa waiver countries must issue passports with biometric identification. The original statutory deadline was October 1, 2004, but last year the WSTPC and other industry organizations were successful in convincing Congress to extend the deadline twelve months. It now appears highly unlikely that many visa waiver countries will be able to comply with the new deadline (as the industry expected last year when it argued for a two year extension). Most of the major countries, such as the U.K. Japan and Germany, are not expected to be able to meet the current deadline. Although

the visa waive countries are trying to comply, technical obstacles are proving difficult hurdles. On February 4<sup>th</sup> the WSTPC joined other industry organizations and companies in a meeting at the Travel Industry Association to begin to plan a strategy to try and obtain another extension. This will be a formidable task because of expected stiff resistance in Congress.

### **Gateways Bill**

Representative George Radanovich (R-CA) reintroduced the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act in the first business week of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress. After falling just short of the Senate finish line in the closing hours of the last two Congresses, a strong effort will be made to gain House passage early in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress to allow maximum time for Senate consideration.

### **Recreation Fee Program**

The WSTPC is now working with the Federal land agencies as they are developing guidelines for implementation of the ten-year new recreation fee authority passed by Congress in 2004. At a February 11 meeting at the Department of Interior, the WSTPC had an opportunity to urge the agencies to recognize the potential for this fee program to be more than just a source of revenue, but also a public information and marketing tool. The WSTPC also emphasized the importance of developing regional, intergovernmental passes and of working closely with state tourism offices and gateway communities in developing coordinated marketing campaigns combined with administration of the fee program.