Park repair backlog hits $13.7 million

Jean Lafitte facility worst off; historic plantations also suffer

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WASHINGTON — A $13.7 million backlog of maintenance work at national parks in Louisiana has slowed repairs at some historic sites and put off restoration work on important structures, including cabins built by slaves, park officials said.

"Those properties are national historic landmarks... that means these places are as significant as the Statue of Liberty," said Laura Gates, superintendent of Cane River Creole National Historical Park in Natchitoches.

She said the park contains "the most intact French Creole plantations anywhere in the United States. We are able to tell all of the stories of all of the people connected with the plantations."

The park, south of Shreveport and north of Alexandria, has a maintenance backlog amounts to $1.19 million, according to a recent report by the National Park Service.

The Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve tops the state list, with $11.3 million in deferred maintenance, followed by the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park with $1.2 million. Both are headquartered in New Orleans.

Although headquartered in New Orleans, the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve is actually scattered across much of South Louisiana with six campuses.

The biggest are in the New Orleans area and include the Barataria Preserve in Marrero.
Oakland Plantation is part of Cane River Creole National Historical Park in Natchitoches. The national park has a maintenance backlog of $1.19 million.

Parks

Continued from Page 1A

the Chalmette Battlefield, site of the battle of New Orleans, in Chalmette and a visitor center in the French Quarter in New Orleans.

But the park also includes the Acadian Cultural Center in Lafayette and the Prairie Acadian Cultural Center in Eunice as well as the Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center in Thibodaux.

Deferred maintenance amounts to $7,805 at the Vicksburg National Military Park, a small part of the national park based in Vicksburg, Miss.

"When we're dealing with old historic structures and monuments, they require a great deal of care," said Bill Justice, acting superintendent of Vicksburg National Military Park in Vicksburg. "Our goal is to make sure these great resources that belong to the people of the United States are there for future generations."

Nationwide, national parks have a $11.5 billion maintenance backlog — an increase of $190 million over last year's estimate. The park service counts deferred maintenance repairs to roads and bridges, visitor centers, trails, and campgrounds that have been put off for more than a year.

In releasing the report last month, National Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis noted that President Barack Obama's fiscal 2016 budget proposal includes additional funding to reduce the backlog as part of efforts to spruce up the parks to mark the National Park Service's centennial next year.

Nationwide, crumbling park roads and bridges account for about half the maintenance backlog.

In Louisiana, Gates said lack of funding is threatening some structures at Cane River Creole National Historical Park, home to 65 historic buildings.

Among those are eight slave quarters at the Magnolia Plantation built in the 1850s. The cabin's hand-made bricks are eroding and need masonry work. Gates said the foundations also need repair and the porches need to be replaced.

"These are very fragile," Gates said. "They're very significant resources for Louisiana ... These are iconic imagery of the stories of the people who lived there."

Some slave quarters are not open to the public, partly because they haven't been restored and partly because of safety concerns, Gates said.

Cane River park officials also hope to repair slave cabins at the Oakland Plantation. Signs at the entrance of the park also need to be replaced.

"These are very important structures, not only in terms of their architecture but because of their meaning and the stories and people that we can connect them to," Gates said.

Many descendants of slaves and slave owners still live in the area, she said.

The Obama administration's 2016 budget calls for a $433 million increase, to $3 billion, for national parks. The park service estimates its staffing would increase by almost 500 full-time employees.

The budget includes $242.8 million to deal with the most urgent deferred maintenance.

But the budget proposal has received a chilly reaction from some Republicans. The GOP controls both the House and Senate.