

## National parks selling out?

By MJ Clark

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - As the National Park Service prepares for its 2016 centennial, it faces a \$7 billion maintenance backlog, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers' Report Card for America's Infrastructure, which gave public parks in general a grade of C-minus.

In response to the funding shortfall, the National Park Service is turning toward corporate funding for support. In fact, this week in Washington D.C., there is an invitation-only summit going on that focuses on how to build support for the NPS agenda.

While not hosted by the NPS, the summit is being staged by the congressionally chartered fund-raising arm of the NPS, the National Park Foundation, along with the network representing park concessionaires and vendors.

One of the summit's main financial sponsors is Coca-Cola, and that's where the trouble begins, according to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). Members claim that Coca-Cola recently leveraged its more than \$13 million contribution to the National Park Foundation to temporarily block a ban on disposable plastic water bottle sales at Grand Canyon National Park.

At least two parks, Zion and Hawaii Volcanoes, already have bottle bans in place. At Hawaii Volcanoes, the cooperating association estimated it will net a profit in reusable bottle sales. At Zion, environmentally aware concessionaire Xanterra Parks & Resorts (which also holds concessions in Yellowstone National Park) voluntarily banned them and lost income on bottled water sales in 2009-10. However, the move at Zion reduced the waste stream by roughly 5,000 pounds annually and cut energy consumption in the visitor center by about 10 percent during 2009-2010.

A Nov. 9 article in the New York Times had Stephen P. Martin, the top parks official at Grand Canyon, saying his supervisors told him that Coca-Cola, which markets Dasani brand water, had registered concerns about the ban. The Times confirmed his account with park, foundation and company officials.

However, Jon Jarvis, NPS director, denied that the block was politically motivated. He was quoted in the same article saying, "My decision to hold off the ban was not influenced by Coke, but rather the service-wide implications to our concessions contracts, and frankly the concern for public safety in a desert park."

The bottle ban is not dead. On Dec. 14 the NPS resurrected it. The new directive will let parks halt sales of water in disposable plastic bottles as long as a regional director signs off on a "rigorous impact analysis" of factors such as the cost of lost sales to concessionaires, the expense of signage directing patrons to filling stations, and the impact to health of thirsty tourists who might drink from "surface water sources with potential exposure to disease" or who neglect to carry their own water on hikes, risking dehydration.

Change.org, which gathered almost 100,000 signatures to protest the ban's delay, took issue with latest directive.

"While it is commendable that the National Park Service has decided not to completely kow-tow to Coca-Cola on a plastic bottle ban, the new policy is still troubling," said petition organizer Stiv Wilson in a prepared statement. "If the barriers to implementation of bottle bans are too cost-prohibitive or onerous for the superintendents to act, then we've only witnessed a bait and switch."