

Stimulus funding announced for parks

Yellowstone Park to get \$14.7M for wastewater treatment plant

By BRETT FRENCH
Of The Gazette Staff

Sewage management may not be sexy, but it is essential.

So the announcement Wednesday that Yellowstone National Park will receive \$9 million for a new wastewater treatment facility at Madison Junction is not likely to elicit cries of joy from the public. But it is one of 14 infrastructure projects funded in Yellowstone that will help maintain and improve the park.

The funds are part of the Department of Interior's \$14.7 million in stimulus funding for Yellowstone. In all, Interior is handing out \$750 million for more than 800 park projects at 391 sites across the United States. Another \$170 million is being spent on park roadways.

"We're excited about these projects," said Danielle Blank of the Livingston office of the National Parks Conservation Association.

The group lobbied for the inclusion of park maintenance funds in the stimulus bill. An analysis by the association said the funding for parks could produce 50,000 new jobs.

Other work in Yellowstone that garnered stimulus funding includes realigning parts of the historic Shelf Lake trail, repaving South Rim Drive at the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and repairing boardwalks, foot bridges and replacing leaking underground fuel storage tanks. The most innovative item on the list may be a \$1.65 million project to install a micro-hydropower system to produce electricity from the flow of stored drinking water at Mammoth Hot Springs. It is estimated the project will reduce annual greenhouse gas emissions by 695 tons and save the park about \$80,000 in electrical bills.

Plenty of work

Yellowstone alone has a deferred maintenance estimated at \$750 million, while there is a \$9 billion national backlog at parks.

"This will help make a dent in that backlog," Blank said. "It will keep our national parks in good shape for our tourist economy, which is the No. 2 industry in Montana."

Other areas in Wyoming receiving an additional \$19.17 million in funding include Devil's Tower, Fort Laramie, Fossil Butte, the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway and Grand Teton National Park. In Montana, Bighorn National Recreation Area, Big Hole National Battlefield, the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site and Glacier National Park will receive more than \$4.53 million.

Glacier will receive the largest chunk in Montana - \$1.95 million - to rehabilitate facilities and repair trails and backcountry campgrounds. Grand Teton will receive the most out of Wyoming's allotment, \$18.82 million, for work such as removal and refurbishing of old structures and trail work.

Lots of millions

Across the nation, California garnered the most in the park's stimulus package - \$97.4 million - followed by the District of Columbia, \$76.88 million, and the state of Washington, \$62.19 million. Washington's Olympic National Park was allocated more stimulus money than any other single place, a total of \$57.8 million.

In comparison, last year's construction budget for all national parks was \$90 million.

In some instances, work will begin immediately.

"These projects are an investment in America's future that will create jobs, stimulate the economies of local communities and get our country moving again," Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said in a

statement. "They are also an investment in telling the story of America to future generations through our national parks by conserving our awe-inspiring landscapes, our rich culture and our great heritage."

Wish lists

Projects were chosen from wish lists submitted by the parks. Criteria included the projects' ability to provide lasting value, save resources, create jobs and provide for public health and safety. The money must be spent or committed by Sept. 30, 2010.

Prior to Congress' passage of The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 in February, funding for parks was one of the most hotly debated sections of the stimulus legislation. Some Republicans and tax relief advocates questioned whether funding for projects such as trail building would provide much of an economic stimulus and said infrastructure spending would be slow to re-enter the economy because of delays caused by such things as acquiring permits.

But projects such as Yellowstone's wastewater treatment plant at Madison Junction, which would replace a 50-year-old facility, are nearly ready to roll since the compliance work was completed in 2006.

"Funding hadn't been coming through normal channels," said Al Nash, Yellowstone's chief of public affairs. "It's not as sexy as building a new visitor center, which makes it hard at times to get funding. But that's an important project for us."

Nash said ground should be broken this summer on the treatment plant, which services the park's largest campground.

"We're very excited about this funding," he said. "It's just going to make things better."

Contact Brett French at french@billingsgazette.com or at 657-1387.