

National Park Service (NPS) Appropriations: Ten-Year Trends

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National Park Service (NPS) Appropriations: Ten-Year Trends

The National Park Service (NPS) receives appropriations in annual Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations acts. Over the past decade (FY2017-FY2026), NPS received both regular (annual) appropriations and, in some years, supplemental appropriations to address damage from hurricanes and other natural disasters. NPS's FY2026 regular appropriation of \$3.267 billion was 11% higher than FY2017 in nominal dollars but 16% lower in inflation-adjusted dollars. NPS received disaster-related supplemental appropriations in FY2018, FY2019, FY2022, FY2023, and FY2025, which were provided outside of regular appropriations laws and were not subject to discretionary spending caps. The largest supplemental was \$2.313 billion in FY2025 (P.L. 118-158) to address damage from natural disasters. In addition to regular and supplemental discretionary appropriations, the agency also has mandatory sources of funding, including both NPS-specific funding and allocations from Department of the Interior (DOI)-wide accounts.

NPS's discretionary appropriations were organized in six accounts from FY2017 through FY2020, and in five accounts thereafter. (One account, with funding for federal land acquisition and outdoor recreation assistance to states, was shifted after FY2020 from discretionary to mandatory spending.) Among the five current accounts, funding for three accounts decreased over the past decade in inflation-adjusted dollars. These included NPS's largest account, which supports basic park operations, as well as an account that funds construction and major repairs and an account for "Centennial Challenge" grants to spur partner donations for park improvements. Two accounts, which both provide for NPS assistance to nonfederal entities, grew in inflation-adjusted dollars over the decade.

The funding changes took place in the context of a 2% decrease in park visitation over the decade. The size of the National Park System remained roughly stable in terms of acreage, but 19 new units (many of relatively small size) were added to the system. The agency's full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing levels declined by an estimated 18% over the decade, owing especially to an estimated staffing decline for FY2026.

A significant issue for NPS throughout the decade was the agency's multibillion-dollar backlog of *deferred maintenance*—infrastructure maintenance and repairs that were not performed as scheduled or as needed. For two discretionary budget activities (within larger budget accounts) that address both regular and deferred maintenance, the combined funding decreased over the decade by an estimated 21% in inflation-adjusted terms. In the latter part of the decade (FY2021-FY2025), the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF), established by the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA; P.L. 116-152), provided mandatory spending to address NPS deferred maintenance. The LRF provided \$1.330 billion annually to NPS for each of FY2021-FY2025; the funding authorization expired in FY2025. NPS's infrastructure needs may continue to receive attention in the 119th Congress, both within and outside the annual appropriations process.

Contents

Introduction	1
Individual NPS Accounts	3
Operation of the National Park System Account.....	5
Construction Account.....	6
Historic Preservation Fund.....	9
National Recreation and Preservation Account.....	10
Centennial Challenge	11
Land Acquisition and State Assistance Account	12
NPS Appropriations in Context	13
Size of the National Park System.....	13
Visits to the National Parks	14
National Park Service Staffing.....	15
Concluding Summary	17

Figures

Figure 1. National Park Service (NPS) Discretionary Appropriations, FY2017-FY2026.....	2
Figure 2. NPS's FY2026 Discretionary Appropriations by Account.....	3
Figure 3. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Operation of the National Park System (ONPS) Account, FY2017-FY2026	5
Figure 4. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Construction Account, FY2017-FY2026	7
Figure 5. Discretionary Appropriations for Two NPS Budget Activities That Primarily Address Maintenance and Repairs, FY2017-FY2026.....	8
Figure 6. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) Account, FY2017-FY2026.....	9
Figure 7. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's National Recreation and Preservation (NR&P) Account, FY2017-FY2026.....	11
Figure 8. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Centennial Challenge Account, FY2017-FY2026	12
Figure 9. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Land Acquisition and State Assistance (LASA) Account, FY2017-FY2026.....	13
Figure 10. Annual Recreational Visits to the National Park System, 2017-2025	15
Figure 11. NPS Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Staff, FY2017-FY2026	16

Tables

Table 1. NPS Discretionary Appropriations, FY2017-FY2026.....	2
Table 2. NPS Discretionary Appropriations by Account, FY2017-FY2026.....	4
Table 3. Size of the National Park System, FY2017-FY2026	14
Table 4. Annual Recreational Visits to the National Park System, 2017-2025	15
Table 5. NPS Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Staff, FY2017-FY2026.....	16

Contacts

Author Information.....	17
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Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS) administers the National Park System, which covers 85 million acres of land and consists of 433 diverse units included for their natural, cultural, and recreational importance. NPS is part of the Department of the Interior (DOI) and receives appropriations in annual Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations acts. This report examines trends in the agency's discretionary appropriations over the past decade (FY2017-FY2026). It also discusses changes in NPS staffing levels, numbers of recreational visits to the parks, and the size of the National Park System during that period.

NPS's discretionary appropriations fluctuated during the past decade (FY2017-FY2026). Regular discretionary appropriations (which exclude supplemental appropriations) totaled \$2.932 billion in FY2017 and \$3.267 billion in FY2026. The FY2026 figure was 11% higher than FY2017 in nominal dollars but 16% lower when adjusted for inflation (**Figure 1** and **Table 1**). The regular appropriations rose in nominal dollars until FY2021 but declined in that year, partly owing to the August 2020 enactment of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA; P.L. 116-152), which shifted some funding previously provided through discretionary appropriations to mandatory spending (see text box, below). The nominal-dollar appropriation has fluctuated since then. NPS received supplemental appropriations for response to natural disasters in FY2018 (P.L. 115-123), FY2019 (P.L. 116-20), FY2022 (P.L. 117-43), FY2023 (P.L. 117-328), and FY2025 (P.L. 118-158).¹ These funds, provided outside of regular appropriations, were not subject to discretionary spending caps. The largest was a supplemental appropriation of \$2.313 billion in FY2025.

Mandatory Appropriations in the National Park Service's (NPS's) Budget

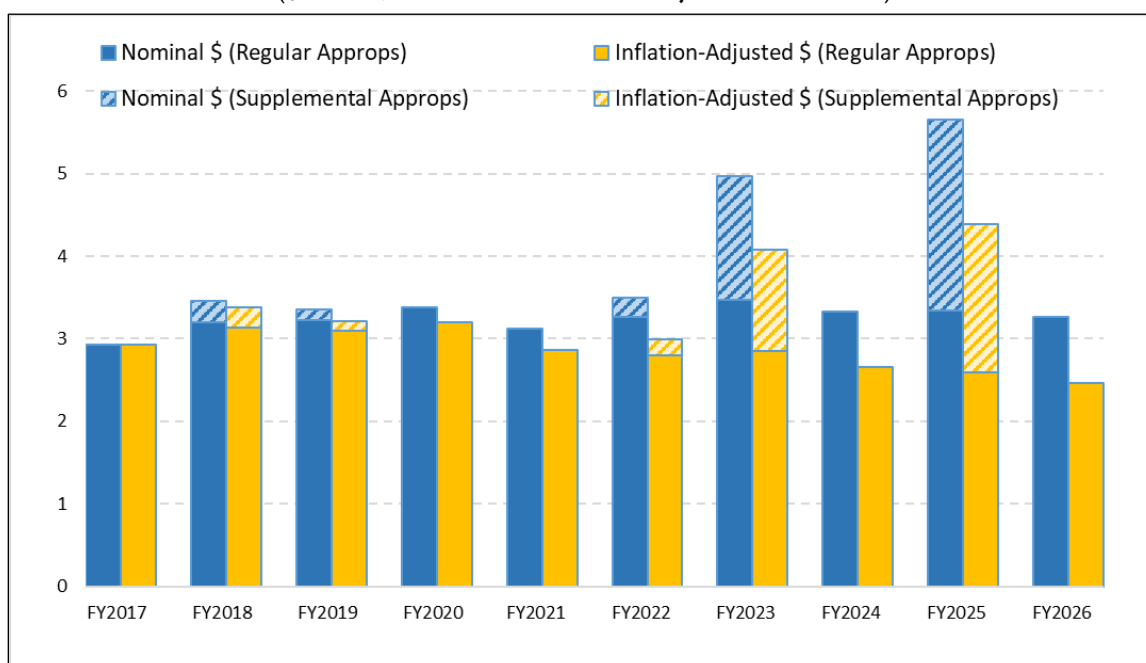
Much of NPS's funding comes from discretionary appropriations, which are controlled by annual appropriations laws. However, NPS also receives mandatory appropriations under various laws, which allow the agency to spend money without further action by Congress. The Department of the Interior estimated NPS's mandatory appropriations for FY2026 at more than \$1 billion. The mandatory funding includes, among others, recreation fees, concession franchise fees, direct cash donations, and funding for NPS land acquisition and assistance to states from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF, 54 U.S.C. §§200301 et seq.). Through FY2020, the LWCF funding had been provided as discretionary appropriations in NPS's Land Acquisition and State Assistance (LASA) account, but it was made mandatory by the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA; P.L. 116-152). In some years, NPS also has received additional mandatory appropriations under various laws. For example, P.L. 117-169, commonly known as the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, contained \$500 million for NPS employee hiring as well as other NPS mandatory appropriations; unobligated balances were later rescinded in P.L. 119-21.

NPS also receives allocations from accounts in the Department of the Interior, which do not appear in either mandatory or discretionary appropriations totals in NPS budget justifications. For FY2021-FY2025, these included approximately \$1.3 billion annually in mandatory appropriations from the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF), the deferred maintenance fund established by the GAOA. The LRF funding authorization expired in FY2025. Other DOI allocations to NPS have included funds from the Federal Lands Transportation Program under surface transportation laws, as well as allocations from other DOI accounts.

¹ The figures and tables in this report generally reflect rescissions and supplemental appropriations to date, including supplemental appropriations from P.L. 115-123 in response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria (FY2018); P.L. 116-20 in response to Hurricanes Florence and Michael, Typhoons Yutu and Mangkhut, and other natural disasters (FY2019); P.L. 117-43 in response to natural disasters in calendar years 2019-2021 (FY2022); P.L. 117-328 in response to natural disasters in and prior to calendar year 2023 (FY2023); and P.L. 118-158 in response to natural disasters in and prior to calendar year 2024 (FY2025). The data exclude permanent (mandatory) budget authorities and generally do not reflect transfers or scorekeeping adjustments. Adjustments for inflation (shown in FY2017 dollars) use the GDP Chained Price Index from White House Office of Management and Budget, FY2027 Budget, *Historical Tables*, Table 10.1, "Gross Domestic Product and Deflators Used in the Historical Tables—1940-2031." For discussion of inflation rates, see CRS In Focus IF10477, *Introduction to U.S. Economy: Inflation*, by Lida R. Weinstock.

Figure I. National Park Service (NPS) Discretionary Appropriations, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ billions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42, Division E. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C.

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

Table I. NPS Discretionary Appropriations, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ billions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars; excludes supplemental appropriations)

	Appropriation in Nominal \$	Appropriation in Inflation-Adjusted 2017 \$	% Change Since Previous Year	
			Nominal	Inflation-Adjusted
FY2017	2.932	2.932	—	—
FY2018 ^a	3.202	3.133	+9%	+7%
FY2019 ^b	3.223	3.096	+1%	-1%
FY2020 ^b	3.377	3.202	+5%	+3%
FY2021	3.123	2.864	-8%	-11%
FY2022 ^c	3.265	2.796	+5%	-2%
FY2023 ^d	3.475	2.845	+6%	+2%
FY2024 ^d	3.325	2.655	-4%	-7%
FY2025 ^e	3.337	2.597	+<1%	-2%
FY2026	3.267	2.469	-2%	-5%
Change Over Decade	+0.335	-0.463	+11%	-16%

Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42, Division E. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C.

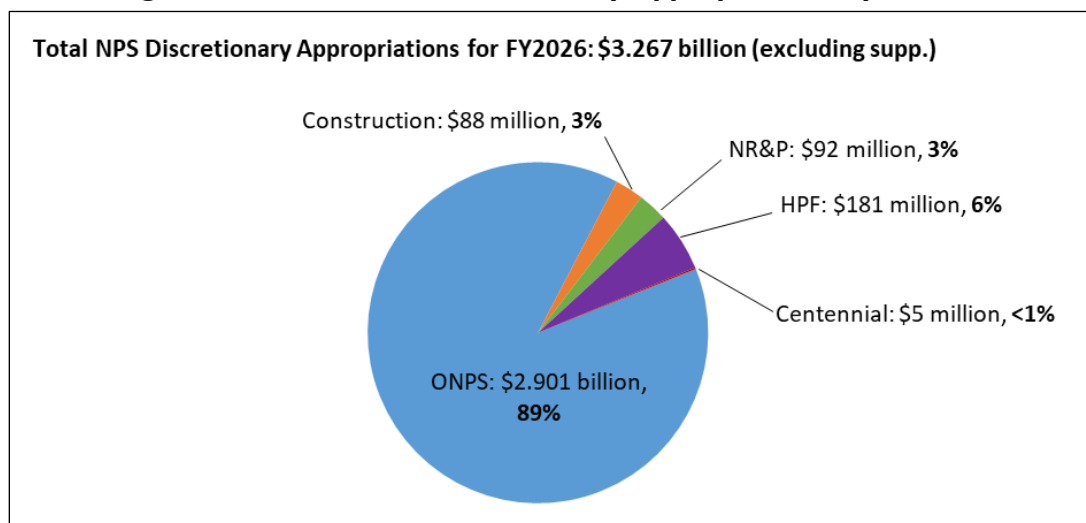
Notes: Amounts exclude supplemental appropriations. See footnote 1 for additional information on this table.

- a. In addition to the FY2018 regular appropriation of \$3.202 billion, Congress provided supplemental appropriations of \$0.258 billion in response to natural disasters. Including the supplemental, the FY2018 appropriation was 18% higher than FY2017 in nominal dollars and 15% higher in inflation-adjusted dollars.
- b. In addition to the FY2019 regular appropriation of \$3.223 billion, Congress provided supplemental appropriations of \$0.128 billion in response to natural disasters. With the supplementals for both FY2018 and FY2019 included, the FY2019 appropriation was 3% less than FY2018 in nominal dollars and 5% less in inflation-adjusted dollars. With the FY2019 supplemental included, the FY2020 appropriation was 1% higher than FY2019 in nominal dollars and 1% lower in inflation-adjusted dollars.
- c. In addition to the FY2022 regular appropriation of \$3.265 billion, Congress provided supplemental appropriations of \$0.229 billion in response to natural disasters. Including the supplemental, the FY2022 appropriation was 12% higher than FY2021 in nominal dollars and 5% higher in inflation-adjusted dollars.
- d. In addition to the FY2023 regular appropriation of \$3.475 billion, Congress provided supplemental appropriations of \$1.500 billion in response to natural disasters. With the supplementals for both FY2022 and FY2023 included, the FY2023 appropriation was 42% more than FY2022 in nominal dollars and 34% more in inflation-adjusted dollars. With the FY2023 supplemental included, the FY2024 appropriation was 33% lower than FY2023 in nominal dollars and 35% lower in inflation-adjusted dollars.
- e. In addition to the FY2025 regular appropriation of \$3.337 billion, Congress provided supplemental appropriations of \$2.313 billion in response to natural disasters. Including the supplemental, the FY2025 appropriation was 70% higher than FY2024 in nominal dollars and 66% higher in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Individual NPS Accounts

During the decade, NPS's appropriations were organized in up to six accounts that covered basic park operations (Operation of the National Park System [ONPS] account); construction and repair of infrastructure (Construction account); grants for historic preservation (Historic Preservation Fund); assistance to nonfederal land managers (National Recreation and Preservation account); matching grants for NPS projects and programs (Centennial Challenge account); and, through FY2020, NPS land acquisition and outdoor recreation grants to states (Land Acquisition and State Assistance [LASA] account). In August 2020, the GAOA designated the LASA funding as mandatory spending, and the discretionary LASA account was not funded thereafter. The largest share of NPS's discretionary appropriations—89% in FY2026—went to the ONPS account, which covers basic park operations (**Figure 2** and **Table 2**).

Figure 2. NPS's FY2026 Discretionary Appropriations by Account



Source: Joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C. Amounts for ONPS and HPF reflect amendments to P.L. 119-74 in P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d).

Notes: ONPS = Operation of the National Park Service; NR&P = National Recreation and Preservation; HPF = Historic Preservation Fund; Centennial = Centennial Challenge; supp. = supplemental appropriations. Figures are in nominal dollars. Percentages may not sum precisely due to rounding.

Table 2. NPS Discretionary Appropriations by Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal dollars and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars; excludes supplemental appropriations)

	ONPS	Construction	HPF	NR&P	CC	LASA	Total
FY2017	2,425.018	209.353	80.910	62.638	20.000	162.029	2,932.018^a
FY2018	2,477.969	359.704 ^b	96.910 ^b	63.638	23.000	180.941	3,202.162^b
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,424.153	351.892	94.805	62.256	22.500	177.011	3,132.618
FY2019	2,502.711	364.704 ^c	102.660 ^c	64.138	20.000	168.444	3,222.657^c
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,404.372	350.374	98.626	61.618	19.214	161.825	3,096.029
FY2020	2,576.992	389.345	118.660	71.166	15.000	206.121	3,377.284
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,443.573	369.187	112.517	67.482	14.223	195.449	3,202.431
FY2021	2,688.287	223.907	144.300	74.157	15.000	— ^d	3,122.651^e
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,465.188	205.325	132.325	68.003	13.755	—	2,863.504
FY2022	2,767.028	225.984 ^f	173.072	83.910	15.000	— ^d	3,264.994^f
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,369.842	193.546	148.229	71.865	12.847	—	2,796.329
FY2023	2,923.424	239.803 ^g	204.515	92.512	15.000	— ^d	3,475.254^g
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,393.111	196.302	167.416	75.730	12.279	—	2,844.838
FY2024	2,888.424	172.255	188.666	91.233	12.000	— ^d	3,325.078^h
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,305.943	137.518	150.620	72.835	9.580	—	2,654.541
FY2025	2,894.424	172.255 ⁱ	168.900	89.593	12.000	— ^d	3,337.172ⁱ
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,251.419	133.988	131.378	69.690	9.334	—	2,595.809
FY2026	2,901.195 ⁱ	88.461	181.059 ⁱ	91.596	5.000	— ^d	3,267.311
<i>Inflation-Adjusted</i>	2,192.394	66.849	136.824	69.218	3.778	—	2,469.063

Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C, except where noted.

Notes: ONPS = Operation of the National Park System account; NR&P = National Recreation and Preservation account; HPF = Historic Preservation Fund account; LASA = Land Acquisition and State Assistance account; CC = Centennial Challenge account. Data exclude supplemental appropriations. See footnote 1 for additional information on this table.

- a. Total for FY2017 reflects a \$28.0 million rescission of Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) contract authority. Because this rescission was not tied to an individual account, the figures for the individual accounts do not add up to the total shown.
- b. The FY2018 total excludes supplemental appropriations of \$257.6 million. Supplemental FY2018 appropriations for specific accounts were \$207.6 million for Construction and \$50.0 million for HPF.
- c. The FY2019 total excludes supplemental appropriations of \$128.0 million. Supplemental FY2019 appropriations for specific accounts were \$78.0 million for Construction and \$50.0 million for HPF.
- d. The Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152), enacted in August 2020, shifted the funding previously provided in the LASA account (i.e., funding from the LWCF) to mandatory appropriations, so there were no discretionary appropriations to this account for FY2021 and subsequent years.
- e. The FY2021 total reflects rescissions of \$23.0 million in unobligated balances from the LASA account.
- f. The FY2022 total excludes supplemental appropriations of \$229.5 million. The supplemental FY2022 appropriations were provided for the Construction account.
- g. The FY2023 total excludes supplemental appropriations of \$1.500 billion. The supplemental FY2023 appropriations were provided for the Construction account.
- h. The FY2024 total reflects rescissions of \$27.5 million in unobligated balances from the Construction account. (The FY2024 amount for Construction does not reflect these rescissions.)
- i. The FY2025 total excludes supplemental appropriations of \$2.313 billion. Supplemental FY2025 appropriations for specific accounts were \$2.263 billion for Construction and \$50.0 million for HPF.
- j. FY2026 amounts for the Operation of the National Park System and Historic Preservation Fund accounts reflect amendments to P.L. 119-74 in P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d).

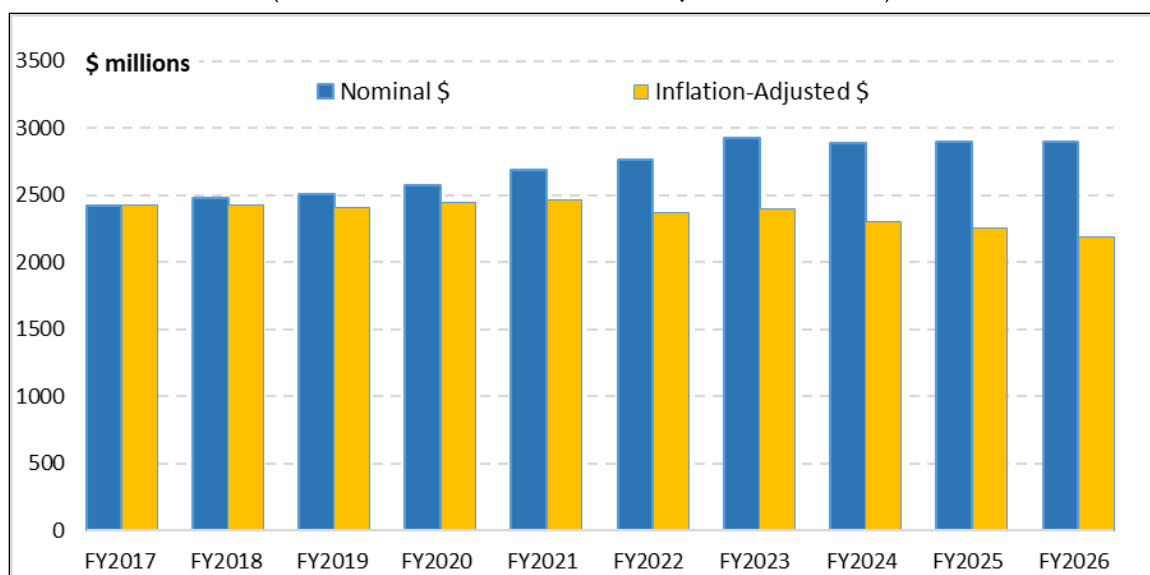
Operation of the National Park System Account

Appropriations for the largest NPS account, entitled Operation of the National Park System (ONPS), support the day-to-day operations of the National Park System. ONPS funding was \$2.425 billion in FY2017 and increased to \$2.901 billion in nominal dollars in FY2026 (**Table 2** and **Figure 3**).² When adjusted for inflation, this represents a 10% decrease for the account. As a percentage of total regular NPS appropriations, the ONPS share was 83% in FY2017 and 89% in FY2026. The ONPS account did not receive supplemental appropriations during the decade.

The majority of ONPS funds are provided directly to individual park units. Activities under the account include resource stewardship, visitor services, park protection (including the U.S. Park Police), facility operations and maintenance, park support, and “external administrative costs” for services provided by outside entities.³ Funding for all these activities decreased over the decade in inflation-adjusted dollars.⁴ The greatest percentage decrease was for the visitor services activity, which fell by 17% in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Figure 3. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS’s Operation of the National Park System (ONPS) Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C, and amendments to P.L. 119-74 in P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d).

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

² The FY2026 appropriation for the ONPS account reflects amendments to P.L. 119-74 in P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d).

³ *Park support* includes administering, managing, and supporting the operations of park units. *External administrative costs* include employee compensation, unemployment compensation, centralized information technology costs, telecommunications, postage, space rental from the General Services Administration, and department program charges.

⁴ In inflation-adjusted dollars, the percentage changes in funding over the decade were as follows: resource stewardship, -8%; visitor services, -17%; park protection, -10%; facility operations and maintenance, -11%; park support, -7%; external administrative costs, -16%. See footnote 1 for information on inflation adjustments.

Construction Account

NPS's Construction account funds repairs and improvements to existing facilities as well as new construction projects and other activities. Regular appropriations for the Construction account (not including supplementals) were highest in the early part of the decade (FY2018-FY2020) in inflation-adjusted dollars (**Table 2** and **Figure 4**). Comparing the beginning and end of the decade, the regular appropriations declined by 68% in inflation-adjusted dollars. Excluding supplementals, the Construction account represented 7% of the total discretionary appropriation in FY2017 and 3% of the total in FY2026.

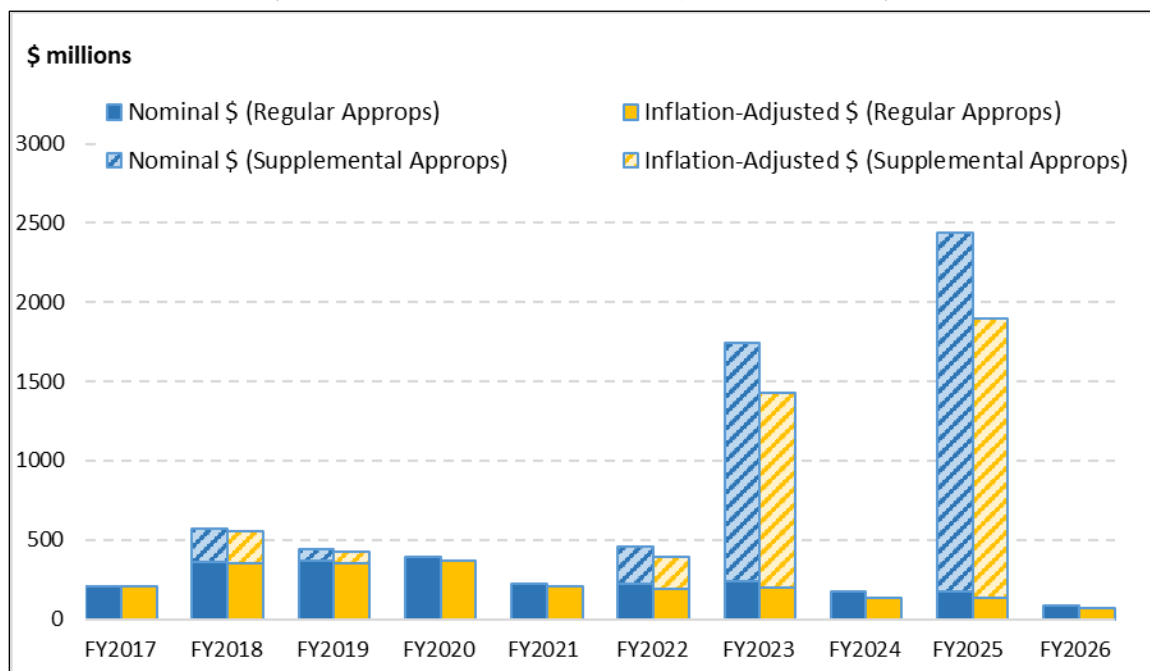
Supplemental appropriations for recovery from natural disasters increased the Construction account totals in FY2018, FY2019, FY2022, FY2023, and FY2025. The largest supplemental appropriations for the Construction account were in FY2023 (\$1.500 billion in P.L. 117-328) and FY2025 (\$2.262 billion in P.L. 118-158). In both years, these supplemental appropriations for disaster recovery considerably exceeded the regular appropriations for the Construction account (**Figure 4**). The FY2025 Construction supplemental was more than two-thirds the size of the entire NPS regular appropriation (for all accounts combined) for FY2025.

Among the specific activities funded in regular appropriations for the Construction account, the largest in each year except FY2026 was *line-item construction and maintenance*, covering the rehabilitation and replacement of existing facilities and construction of new facilities. (Also see text box below.) Appropriations for this budget activity more than doubled in inflation-adjusted dollars between FY2017 and FY2020 before declining in FY2021-FY2025 and then dropping sharply in FY2026 (by 98% compared with FY2025). The joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, the law containing FY2026 NPS appropriations, stated that the requested line-item construction funding for FY2026 was “shifted” to the ONPS account because NPS did not submit a list of proposed line-item construction projects.⁵ Other activities funded in the Construction account include emergency and unscheduled construction, repair or replacement of employee housing, dam safety, equipment replacement, construction planning and program management, development of general management plans for park units, and preparation of special studies of areas (for instance, to assess their potential for inclusion in the National Park System).

⁵ NPS typically submits such lists in its annual budget justifications, but NPS did not release a budget justification for FY2026. The joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74 stated: “As has occurred for several decades, the Committees have consistently provided Line-Item Construction funding in conjunction with further direction on the specific projects funded, which are based on requests and information provided by the [National Park] Service. At the time of this writing, the Committees have not received a list of requested line-item construction projects for fiscal year 2026. Therefore, the requested funding for Line-Item Construction in fiscal year 2026 has been shifted in the bill to repair and rehabilitation projects within the Operation of the National Park System. The Committees look forward to continuing to support providing funding to the Service for Line-Item Construction projects.”

Figure 4. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Construction Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C, and from P.L. 118-158.

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

NPS Infrastructure: Funding for Maintenance and Repairs

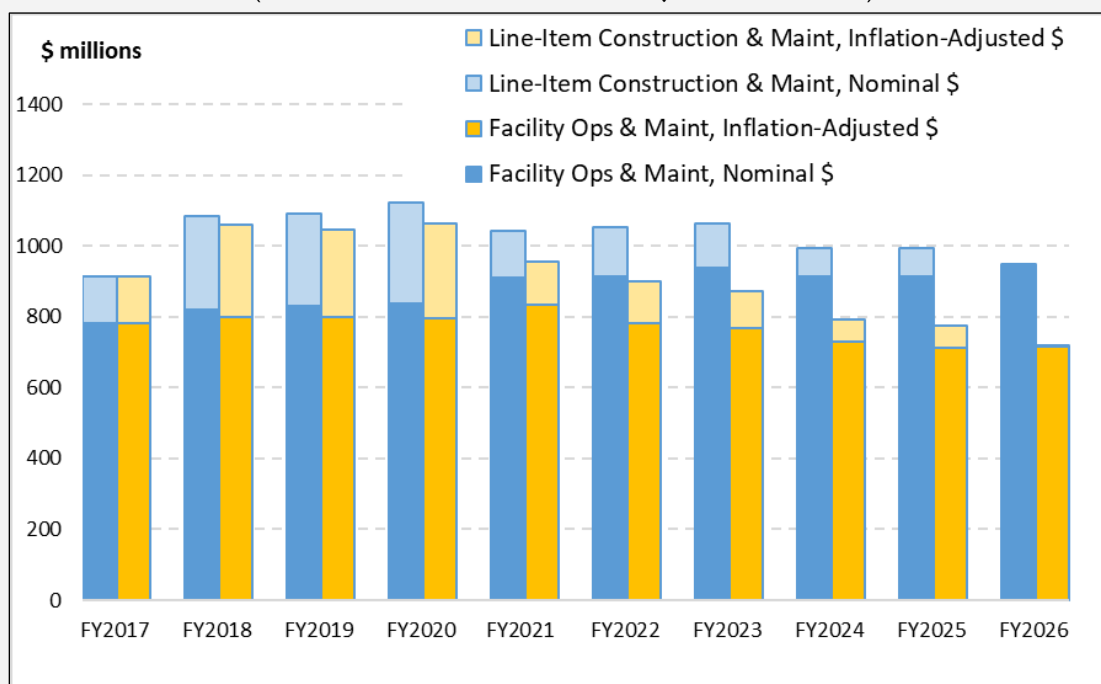
NPS's substantial backlog of deferred maintenance (DM)—infrastructure maintenance and repairs that were not performed as scheduled or as needed—has been an ongoing concern for many in Congress. The backlog grew in nominal dollars from an estimated \$11.607 billion in FY2017 to an estimated \$24.237 billion as of the end of FY2025. This is a growth of 108% in nominal dollars or 58% in inflation-adjusted terms, and includes a 60% nominal-dollar increase in one year (FY2020-FY2021), which NPS attributed in part to changes in its methods for estimating DM. In addition to addressing DM, NPS also must budget for ongoing cyclic and routine maintenance to keep infrastructure in good condition and to avoid adding to the DM backlog.

Discretionary appropriations, along with allocations from the Department of Transportation for road and bridge improvements, historically provided most of the agency's funding for maintenance and repairs. In 2020, however, the Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152) established the National Parks and Public Lands Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) with mandatory funding for NPS DM of up to \$1.330 billion annually for FY2021-FY2025. The LRF funding authorization expired in FY2025.

Within NPS's discretionary appropriations, two budget activities have provided the primary support to address maintenance and repairs (both regular and deferred): the *line-item construction and maintenance* activity within the Construction account and the *facility operations and maintenance* activity within the Operation of the National Park System account. (These budget activities also fund some functions outside of direct maintenance and repairs.) Combined funding for these two budget areas (**Figure 5**) generally increased through FY2020 and then declined, for an overall decrease of 21% in inflation-adjusted dollars over the decade. Other discretionary and mandatory funds from multiple sources also have been used for NPS maintenance and repairs.

Figure 5. Discretionary Appropriations for Two NPS Budget Activities That Primarily Address Maintenance and Repairs, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources and Notes: NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025; joint explanatory statements for P.L. 118-42 and P.L. 119-74; and P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d). Excludes supplemental appropriations. See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure. For FY2026, the line-item construction and maintenance appropriation of \$3.2 million is too small to be visible in the chart.

For more information on NPS maintenance and repairs, see CRS Report R48136, *National Park Service Deferred Maintenance: Overview and Issues*; CRS Report R43997, *Deferred Maintenance of Federal Land Management Agencies: FY2013-FY2022 Estimates and Issues*; and CRS In Focus IF12888, *The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA): Frequently Asked Questions*.

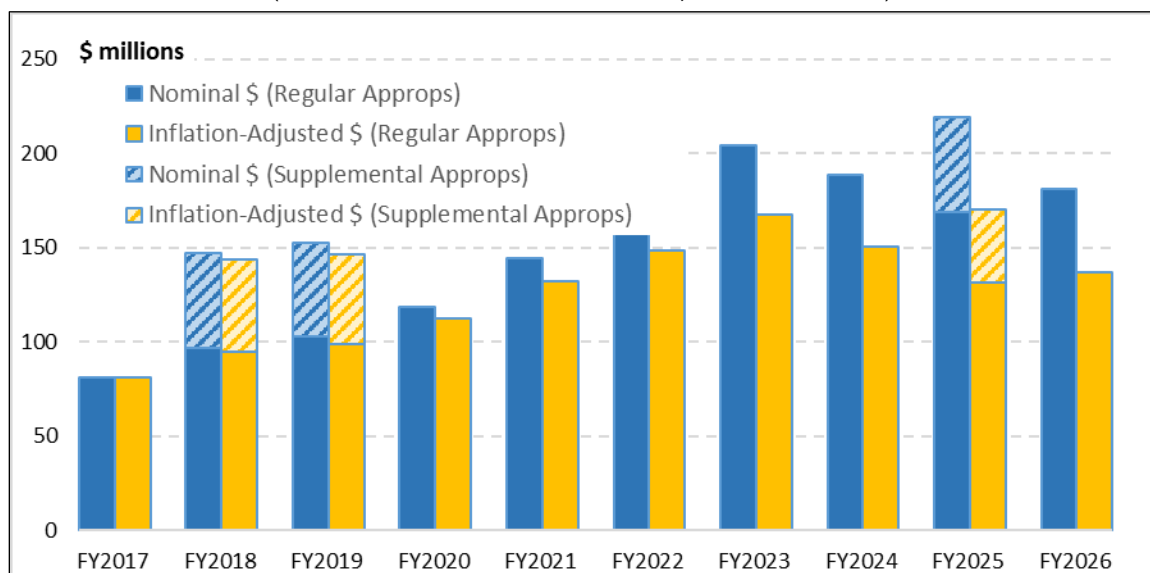
Historic Preservation Fund

The Historic Preservation Fund (HPF), established in 1976, is administered by NPS through appropriations to the agency's HPF account. In accordance with the purposes of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA),⁶ the fund provides grants-in-aid to state and tribal historic preservation offices and other entities for conservation of cultural and historical assets and sites. Some of these grants are awarded by formula, and others are provided through competitive programs. The HPF is funded by revenues from oil and gas activities on the U.S. outer continental shelf. Funding was reauthorized through FY2026 in P.L. 119-74.

The HPF has received \$150 million annually in deposits from offshore oil and gas revenues, but the funding is available only to the extent appropriated by Congress. Annual appropriations from the account were less than the deposited amount during the first part of the decade but subsequently increased and in recent years exceeded the annual deposit. The FY2026 appropriation was 69% higher in inflation-adjusted dollars than the FY2017 appropriation (**Figure 6** and **Table 2**). The HPF account represented 3% of the total NPS appropriation in FY2017 and 6% of the total in FY2026.

Figure 6. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from P.L. 118-158; the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C; and amendments to P.L. 119-74 in P.L. 119-75, Division D, Section 426(d).

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

Supplemental appropriations augmented regular appropriations for the HPF account in three years—FY2018, FY2019, and FY2025—and were targeted to disaster recovery.⁷ The funding was

⁶ P.L. 89-665, as amended; 54 U.S.C. §§300101 et seq. For more information on historic preservation and the Historic Preservation Fund (HPF), see CRS Report R45800, *The Federal Role in Historic Preservation: An Overview*, by Mark K. DeSantis.

⁷ P.L. 115-123, P.L. 116-20, and P.L. 118-158.

mainly to assist recovering states and territories with compliance activities related to Section 106 of the NHPA.⁸ Under Section 106, undertakings that receive federal funds or permits—including some disaster recovery activities—must be evaluated for their potential effects on historic properties.

The largest activity in the HPF account typically has been grant funding for state historic preservation offices, which declined by 2% in inflation-adjusted terms over the decade. Grants for tribal historic preservation offices rose by 71% after adjusting for inflation. The account also funded various competitive grant programs in particular years. For FY2026, these included grants for sites associated with the African American civil rights movement, grants to preserve the history of equal rights struggles, and grants for sites associated with underrepresented communities. As separate line items in FY2026, the account also funded grants for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), historic revitalization, the Save America's Treasures program to restore nationally significant historic structures and artifacts, preservation activities related to the U.S. Semiquincentennial (the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States), and other projects.

National Recreation and Preservation Account

The National Recreation and Preservation (NR&P) account funds NPS programs that primarily assist state, local, tribal, and private land managers with outdoor recreation planning, natural and cultural resource preservation, and other conservation-related activities outside the National Park System. Appropriations for the account were 11% higher in inflation-adjusted dollars in FY2026 as compared with FY2017 (**Figure 7** and **Table 2**). The portion of NPS discretionary appropriations used for the NR&P account was 2% in FY2017 and 3% in FY2026. The NR&P account did not receive supplemental funding during the decade.

A variety of natural, cultural, and recreational assistance programs are funded in the NR&P account. NPS's Heritage Partnership Program, which provides funding assistance to national heritage areas, is the largest single program in the account.⁹ Appropriations for the program grew over the decade by 18% in inflation-adjusted dollars, despite NPS budget requests for reductions in many years. There are 61 national heritage areas, 13 of which were established since 2019.¹⁰ The NR&P account also has included other programs that assist nonfederal entities, such as the American Battlefield Protection Program;¹¹ Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program; National Natural Landmarks and National Historic Landmarks Programs; and National Register of Historic Places. The account further covers international park affairs and environmental and compliance review.

⁸ 54 U.S.C. §306108.

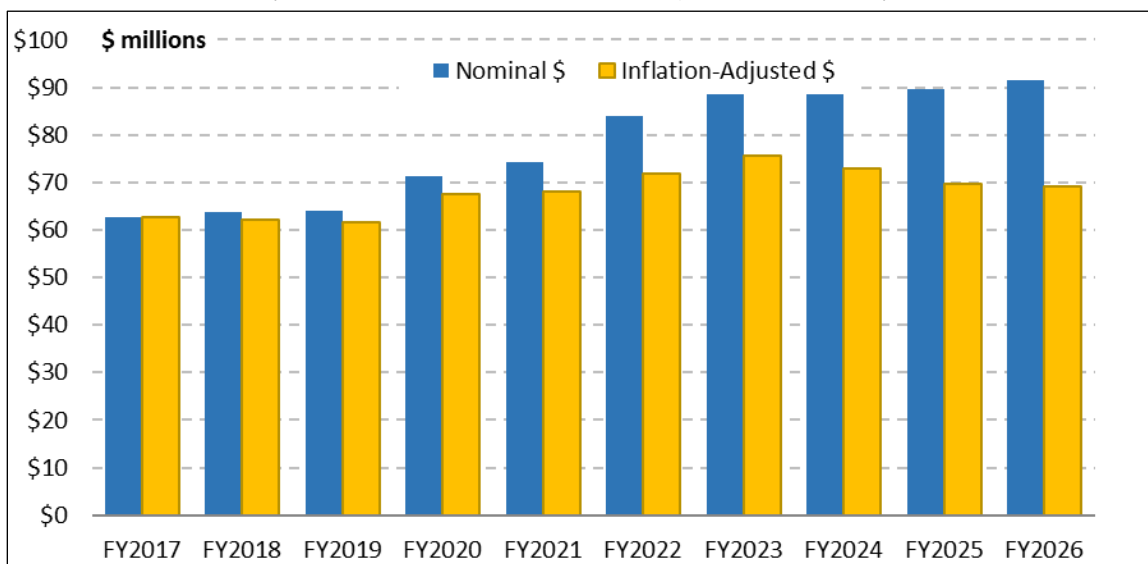
⁹ National heritage areas are established by Congress but are not federally managed, and they are not part of the National Park System. For more on national heritage areas, see CRS Report RL33462, *National Heritage Areas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Mark K. DeSantis. Within the National Recreation and Preservation account, the Cultural Programs activity received more funding than Heritage Partnership Programs, but the Cultural Programs activity covers multiple different programs.

¹⁰ These 13 national heritage areas were established in P.L. 116-9 and P.L. 117-339.

¹¹ The American Battlefield Protection Program's (ABPP's) planning grants are funded in the NR&P account, while grants to states for battlefield land acquisition, modernization, and restoration are funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (see below). For more on the ABPP, see CRS In Focus IF11329, *American Battlefield Protection Program*, by Mark K. DeSantis.

Figure 7. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's National Recreation and Preservation (NR&P) Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C.

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

Centennial Challenge

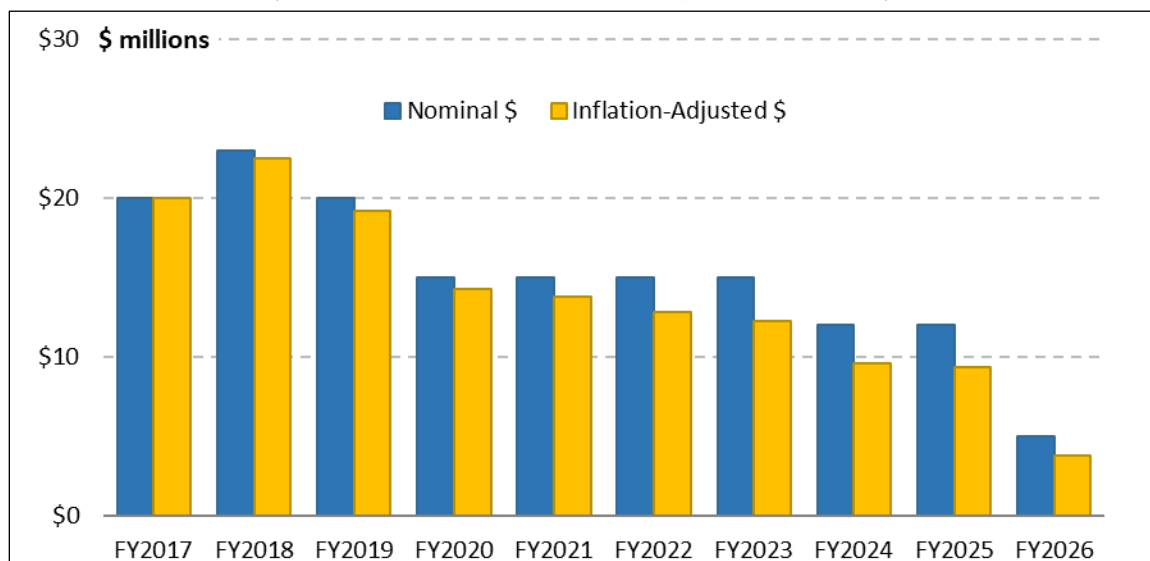
Discretionary appropriations for the Centennial Challenge account have been small compared to other NPS accounts, representing less than 1% of total NPS funding annually. The appropriations ranged from \$5.0 million to \$23.0 million in nominal dollars over the decade (**Table 2** and **Figure 8**), and the FY2026 appropriation was 81% lower than FY2017 in inflation-adjusted dollars.

The account consists of discretionary appropriations for the Centennial Challenge Fund, a matching-grant program to spur partner donations for park improvements, with a priority on addressing deferred maintenance.¹² The name “Centennial Challenge” indicates the fund’s origin as a program to improve the parks in connection with NPS’s 2016 centennial anniversary and its second century of park management. The program was originally developed administratively, and Congress had provided discretionary appropriations in some years prior to its 2016 statutory authorization in P.L. 114-289. The Centennial Challenge Fund also receives mandatory appropriations from certain sales of National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes to seniors. The senior pass revenues are provided as offsetting collections. Revenues are to be matched on at least a one-to-one basis by nonfederal donations.

¹² The Centennial Challenge Fund provides the federal share of matching grants for “signature” park projects and programs identified by the Interior Secretary and must “help prepare the national parks for another century of conservation, preservation, and visitor enjoyment” (P.L. 114-289).

Figure 8. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Centennial Challenge Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2023 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. Data for FY2024 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 118-42. Data for FY2025 and FY2026 are from the joint explanatory statement for P.L. 119-74, Division C.

Note: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure.

Land Acquisition and State Assistance Account

Through FY2020, NPS's LASA account consisted of discretionary appropriations from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF, 54 U.S.C. §§200301 et seq.). The LWCF is the primary funding source for the federal land management agencies to acquire lands, and it also funds NPS-administered grants to states for outdoor recreation needs.¹³ Under the LWCF Act, the LWCF receives deposits of \$900 million annually, primarily from offshore oil and gas revenues.¹⁴ Through FY2020, this funding was available only to the extent provided in discretionary appropriations acts. In August 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA; P.L. 116-152) made all funding from the LWCF mandatory spending.¹⁵ Thus, there were no discretionary appropriations for NPS's LASA account in FY2021-FY2026.

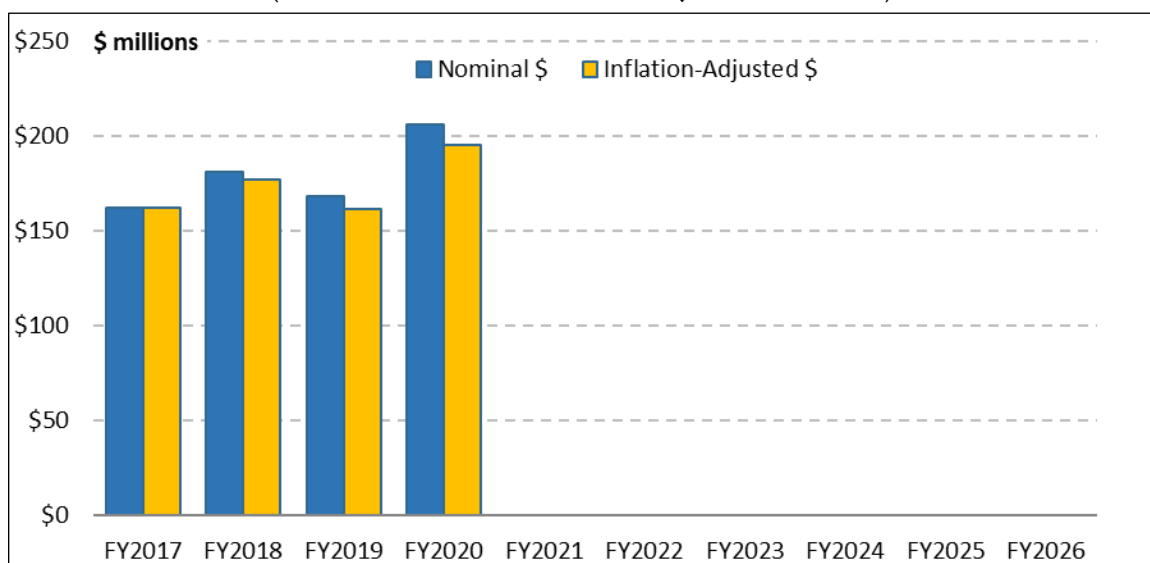
¹³ For more information on the LWCF, see CRS In Focus IF12256, *Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): Frequently Asked Questions*.

¹⁴ The state grant program of the LWCF also receives additional mandatory funding from offshore oil and gas revenues under the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-432).

¹⁵ For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12888, *The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA): Frequently Asked Questions*. Although the funding is now provided through mandatory appropriations, allocation of amounts remains an issue in the discretionary appropriations process, as the GAOA provides that appropriations acts may specify alternate allocations to those proposed by the President.

Figure 9. Discretionary Appropriations for NPS's Land Acquisition and State Assistance (LASA) Account, FY2017-FY2026

(\$ millions, in nominal and inflation-adjusted 2017 dollars)



Sources: Data for FY2017-FY2020 are from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2022.

Notes: See footnote 1 for additional information on this figure. Not reflected in the figure is a cancellation of \$23.0 million in unobligated balances from the LASA account in FY2021.

NPS Appropriations in Context

Changes in NPS appropriations can be considered in the context of changes in the National Park System's size, the numbers of annual visits to the parks, and agency staffing levels, among other factors. Over the past decade, the size of the National Park System remained roughly steady in terms of acreage, but 19 new units were added. Total annual visits to the parks decreased by 2% and NPS staffing levels fell by 18% during the decade.

Size of the National Park System

National Park System acreage remained steady (growth of less than 1%) at approximately 85 million acres during the decade (**Table 3**). The percentage of National Park System lands owned by the federal government was about 95% of total system lands throughout the decade.¹⁶ The remainder—the nonfederal land in the system—includes lands within park boundaries (sometimes known as “inholdings”) that are owned by state or local governments and by private landowners.

¹⁶ Almost all of the system's federally owned lands are directly administered by NPS. However, the federally owned portion of the system also includes some NPS “less than fee” acres (e.g., conservation easements or rights-of-way) and some lands managed by other federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Reclamation or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Taken together, these two types of lands amount to about 1% of the federally owned portion of the system.

Table 3. Size of the National Park System, FY2017-FY2026

(in millions of acres)

	Federal Land	Nonfederal Land	Total Acreage
FY2017	81.008	4.031	85.039
FY2018	81.011	4.034	85.045
FY2019	81.095	4.005	85.100
FY2020	81.098	4.015	85.112
FY2021	81.104	4.012	85.116
FY2022	81.130	4.005	85.134
FY2023	81.158	3.996	85.154
FY2024	81.177	3.982	85.159
FY2025	81.183	3.979	85.162
FY2026 (through Mar.)	81.185	3.978	85.163

Source: NPS, Land Resources Division, “National Park Service Acreage Reports,” <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/acregareports.htm>.

Notes: Federal Land category includes NPS Fee Acres, Less Than Fee Acres, and Other Federal Fee Acres. Nonfederal Land category includes Other Public Acres and Private Acres. Totals may not sum precisely due to rounding.

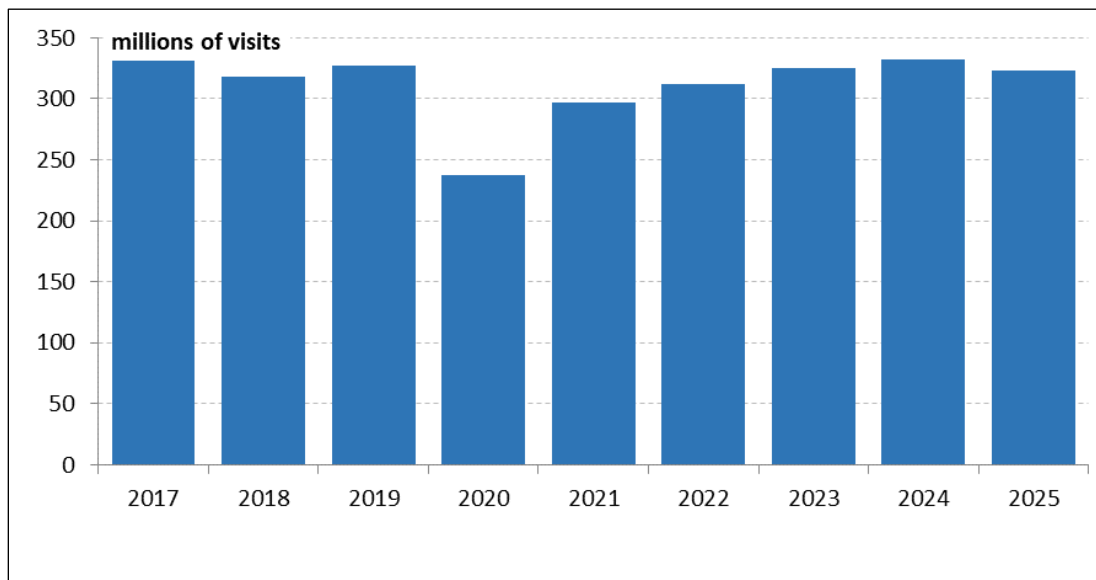
A total of 19 units were added to the system in the FY2017-FY2026 period (to date).¹⁷ Many were relatively small in acreage, such as Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument in Mississippi (0.74 acres) and Blackwell School National Historic Site in Texas (0.77 acres). The largest unit added to the system during the decade was Mill Springs Battlefield National Monument in Kentucky (1,454.23 acres). Other acreage changes resulted from boundary adjustments in existing parks.

Visits to the National Parks

Numbers of recreational visits to the National Park System varied over the past 10 years. The highest numbers of visits (roughly 330 million each year) were in calendar years 2017 and 2024 (**Figure 10** and **Table 4**). Visits dropped significantly in 2020 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded to approximately 331 million in 2024, before declining in 2025 (the most recent year available). The number of visits in 2025—approximately 323 million—was 2% lower than in 2017. Many factors may affect visits to the parks in a given year, including national economic conditions, park closures due to weather-related disasters or lapses in appropriations (such as the six-week government shutdown in October and November 2025), changes in population demographics, competing recreational choices, and other factors.

¹⁷ These units are the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park (NY), Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument (AL), Freedom Riders National Monument (AL), Reconstruction Era National Historical Park (SC), Camp Nelson National Monument (KY), Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial (DC), Mill Springs Battlefield National Monument (KY), Ste. Genevieve National Historical Park (MO), Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument (MS), New Philadelphia National Historic Site (IL), Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument (IL and MS), North Country National Scenic Trail (multiple states), New England National Scenic Trail (multiple states), Ice Age National Scenic Trail (multiple states), Amache National Historic Site (CO), Blackwell School National Historic Site (TX), Springfield 1908 Race Riot National Monument (IL), Carlisle Federal Indian Boarding School National Monument (PA), and Frances Perkins National Monument (ME). A list of recent additions to the National Park System is at NPS, “Recent Changes in the National Park System,” <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/recent-changes.htm>.

Figure 10. Annual Recreational Visits to the National Park System, 2017-2025
(total visits in millions, by calendar year)



Source: NPS, "NPS Stats," <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/National>. The latest available year is 2025.

Table 4. Annual Recreational Visits to the National Park System, 2017-2025
(total visits in millions, by calendar year)

Year	Number of Visits (in millions)	Year	Number of Visits (in millions)
2017	330.9	2022	312.0
2018	318.2	2023	325.5
2019	327.5	2024	331.9
2020	237.1	2025	323.0
2021	297.1		

Source: NPS, "NPS Stats," <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/National>. The latest available year is 2025.

National Park Service Staffing

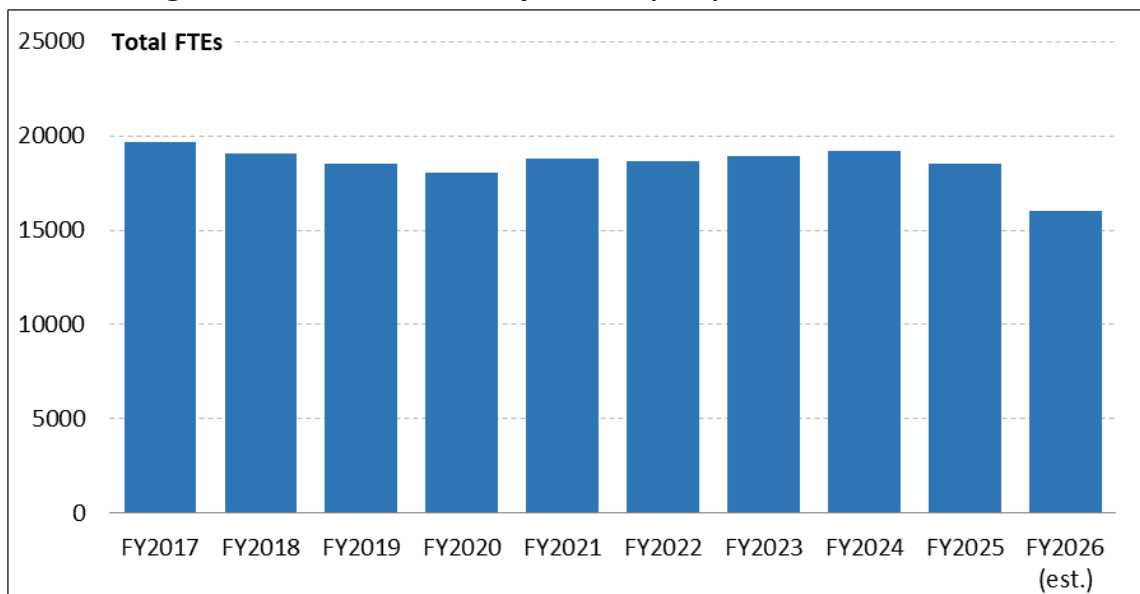
NPS's full-time equivalent (FTE) staff levels were in the 18,000-20,000 range for most of the decade and declined to roughly 16,000 (estimated) for FY2026 (**Figure 11** and **Table 5**).¹⁸ The estimate for FY2026, based on enacted FY2026 appropriations, was 18% lower than FY2017.¹⁹

¹⁸ These employment figures, reported in NPS budget justifications, differ from those reported by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). NPS calculates employment by full-time equivalents (FTEs), defined as the total number of regular straight-time hours (not including overtime or holiday hours) worked by employees, divided by the number of compensable hours applicable to each fiscal year. By contrast, OPM data measure "all active employees (in either a pay or non-pay status) for each agency's workforce as of the last day of each month" (OPM, "Federal Workforce Data: Data Downloads," <https://data.opm.gov/explore-data/data/data-downloads>).

¹⁹ NPS, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2027*, p. 4, https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-04/fy2027greenbooknps_0.pdf. In its summary of employee counts (which differ from FTE levels), NPS noted that the staffing estimates reflect the realignment of NPS wildland fire management personnel to a new centralized DOI entity during FY2026, among other staffing changes (p. 169 of budget justification).

Staffing was supported by discretionary and mandatory appropriations. For example, in 2022, P.L. 117-169 included a mandatory appropriation of \$500 million for NPS employee hiring. In 2025, P.L. 119-21 rescinded unobligated balances from this appropriation; the rescinded amount is not readily available.

Figure 11. NPS Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Staff, FY2017-FY2026



Sources: FY2017-FY2023 from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. FY2024-FY2026 from *President's Budget Appendix* for FY2025-FY2027. Includes FTEs funded through supplemental appropriations.

Table 5. NPS Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Staff, FY2017-FY2026

Year	Number of FTEs	Year	Number of FTEs
FY2017	19,668	FY2022	18,660
FY2018	19,032	FY2023	18,905
FY2019	18,544	FY2024	19,174
FY2020	18,060	FY2025	18,541
FY2021	18,814	FY2026 (est.)	16,039

Sources: FY2017-FY2023 from NPS budget justifications for FY2019-FY2025. FY2024-FY2026 from *President's Budget Appendix* for FY2025-FY2027. Includes FTEs funded through supplemental appropriations.

Staffing capacity supported by appropriations does not necessarily measure the number of positions filled at any given time. For example, following Administration initiatives during 2025 to reduce the size of the federal workforce to achieve efficiencies, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management reported a 16% drop in NPS employee counts during FY2025.²⁰

²⁰ See Executive Order 14210, "Implementing the President's 'Department of Government Efficiency' Workforce Optimization Initiative," February 11, 2025; and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "Federal Workforce Data: Workforce Size & Composition," <https://data.opm.gov/explore-data/analytics/workforce-size-and-composition>.

Concluding Summary

NPS's regular discretionary appropriations grew by 11% in nominal dollars but declined by 16% in inflation-adjusted dollars over the 2017-2026 decade. In particular, accounts with funding for activities within the National Park System—including accounts for basic park operations, construction (including repairs), and “Centennial Challenge” park improvements—declined in inflation-adjusted dollars, while two accounts through which NPS assists nonfederal entities outside the park system grew. For activities within the park system, the discretionary appropriations were supplemented by some other funding sources, typically targeted to specific purposes. The largest of these were supplemental appropriations for disaster relief (especially in FY2023 and FY2025); mandatory appropriations for land acquisition from the LWCF (which shifted from discretionary to mandatory during the decade); and allocations from a DOI-wide account for the deferred maintenance fund established in 2020 by the GAOA.

NPS's funding changes occurred in the context of fluctuations in annual visits to the parks, influenced by weather-related disasters, government shutdowns, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other factors. Visits to the parks peaked in 2017 and 2024 at approximately 330 million visits for each of those years, and were 323 million for 2025. Agency staffing levels declined by an estimated 18% over the decade, owing especially to an estimated staffing decline for FY2026. Although park acreage remained steady, 19 units were added to the system over the 10-year period.

A major funding issue for NPS is infrastructure reinvestment. The agency's backlog of deferred maintenance and repairs was estimated at \$24.237 billion as of the end of FY2025. The estimated backlog grew over the decade by 58% in inflation-adjusted dollars, although some of the growth was attributed to changes in the agency's methods for estimating deferred maintenance. For two discretionary subaccounts (within the ONPS and Construction accounts) that mainly address both regular and deferred maintenance, the combined funding decreased by 21% in inflation-adjusted dollars over this period. The GAOA's deferred maintenance fund provided over \$1 billion annually in new mandatory spending to address NPS deferred maintenance in the FY2021-FY2025 period; this funding authorization terminated in FY2025.²¹ NPS's infrastructure needs may continue to receive attention in the 119th Congress, both within and outside the annual appropriations process.

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²¹ For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12888, *The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA): Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and Laura B. Comay.

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