



Make no mistake: the disclosure last week that the California State Parks Department was sitting on \$54 million of excess funds while claiming that parks all over the state had to be closed is a real hit. Parks director Ruth Coleman — actually, a talented and dedicated public servant — did the right thing and immediately resigned, although as far as anyone can tell, she had no idea that the funds were there. The culprit appears to be one Manuel Lopez, a Parks Department mid-level manager who was stashing the funds away.

Everyone has said the right things: the Finance Department is doing an immediate audit, the wonderful [California State Parks Foundation](#), which has worked long and hard to protect parks, has pronounced itself “appalled,” and now [the Governor is saying](#), at least, that it will use the funds for park improvements.

But let's put everything in perspective.

First, state parks currently face a \$1.3 billion backlog in improvements. That \$54 million isn't even a drop in the bucket. For anti-tax zealots like [Joel Fox](#) to suggest that somehow the parks scandal means that we should continue to starve state government is quite ridiculous.

Second, and more importantly, it comes at exactly the wrong time, as Republicans in Congress have managed to decimate the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, reducing the Senate's proposed \$700 million appropriation to a little over **\$66 million**. Even based upon last year's funding, the Ayn Rand Congress has achieved a 60% reduction in an absolutely critical program. [As Margaret Walls explains](#),

Most Americans haven't even heard of the LWCF. But it has been arguably the most important source of funding for parks and recreation in the U.S. for the past 40 years. The 1965 Land and Water Conservation Fund Act and subsequent legislation in the 1970s authorized creation of a fund of \$900 million annually, financed mostly by oil and gas lease revenues, to be used for federal land acquisition and a state and local grant program. Over 7 million acres of land have been protected with LWCF funding since the program began – from some of the country's most iconic parks and public lands such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and the Appalachian Trail, to local parks in nearly every county in the U.S.

Third, the state Finance Department for years audited the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and proposed killing the agency entirely (even though they never found any audit problems), but completely overlooked this. Now it is getting on its high horse.

The California State Parks Department made a big mistake. Antitax nuts, Objectivist crazies, and incompetent auditors are making bigger ones. What's the real scandal here?