



OFFICE OF  
**INSPECTOR GENERAL**  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

# **BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK MISMANAGED MORE THAN \$250,000 IN EQUIPMENT PURCHASES**




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**FEB 05 2020**

Memorandum

To: David Vela  
Deputy Director Exercising the Authority of Director for the National Park Service

From: Mark L. Greenblatt   
Inspector General

Subject: Final Inspection Report – Big Bend National Park Mismanaged More Than \$250,000 in Equipment Purchases  
Report No. 2019-ER-042

This report presents the results of our inspection of purchases made during fiscal years (FYs) 2013 and 2015 at Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas. We initiated this inspection after receiving information that the park purchased air conditioning units and shade shelters and never installed them. Attachment 1 provides our scope and methodology.

Our objective was to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the reported information. We found that the park purchased 22 air conditioning units and 26 shade shelters that it never installed, a total of more than \$250,000 that could have been put to better use (see Attachment 2 for monetary impact). Given the park's reported nearly \$90 million in deferred maintenance, this raises concerns about the management of these funds.

## **Background**

In April 2019, we received information that funds may have been misspent at the park during FYs 2013 and 2015; specifically, that the park purchased, but never installed, air conditioning units and shade shelters, leaving them instead in warehouses or outdoor storage areas. We referred the reported information to the National Park Service (NPS), which conducted an independent review.<sup>1</sup>

## **Park Mismanaged More Than \$250,000 Worth of Equipment**

We found that during FYs 2013 and 2015, the Big Bend Facilities Management department purchased 22 heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) units and 26 shade shelters. Though the Facilities Management department followed appropriate procurement procedures when purchasing these items, it never installed them once received at the park.<sup>2</sup> The cost of the HVAC units purchased totaled \$140,117 and the shade shelters totaled \$115,000.

<sup>1</sup> The NPS review addressed broader issues of mismanagement in addition to the specific items in the scope of this inspection. The NPS findings were consistent with the results of our inspection.

<sup>2</sup> The facilities manager claimed to have installed two of the HVAC units but provided no support to prove the installation.

### *More than \$140,000 in HVAC Units Sit Idle in Warehouses and Open Lots*

In FY 2013, park officials purchased 4 HVAC units costing a total of \$27,426, and in FY 2014 the park purchased an additional 18 units costing a total of \$112,691. These units, purchased 5 to 6 years ago, have sat unused in various indoor (warehouses) and outdoor (open lots) locations around the park, despite the project's purchase justification, which states, "the extreme temperatures and sunlight exposure necessitate regular replacement of the heating and cooling systems." See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Unused HVAC Units Outdoors and in a Warehouse in 2019**



Source: OIG

While the park facilities manager told us that the units still meet U.S. Environmental Protection Agency refrigerant rules and could still be installed on the residences for which they were intended, we question both the necessity of the initial purchases and the viability of units that have sat unmaintained, and in some cases exposed to the elements, for 5 or more years. We asked why they were never installed if the units are still usable for their intended purpose, and the facilities manager told us that she was hesitant to replace units while the old ones still worked, further calling into question the need for the purchases.

Finally, we noted that in the Project Management Information System (PMIS), which the NPS uses to justify and track certain facilities-related projects, the HVAC projects were all marked as completed. Final comments on individual projects included statements such as, "work completed-new units!!!" and "new energy efficient units!!!" The former superintendent certified these projects as complete in the PMIS, but there is no indication of any oversight or review of their actual completeness other than the former park superintendent's digital signature.

### *\$115,000 in Shade Shelters Remain Uninstalled*

We also confirmed that the park purchased 26, 12-foot by 20-foot shade shelters for \$115,000 as part of an overall campground rehabilitation project and did not install them. Park staff explained they could not install the shelters themselves, and that other aspects of the

campground rehabilitation, such as filling and grading for erosion control, exhausted funds that otherwise could have been used to construct the shelters.

Park staff purchased the shelters in FY 2015 and marked the overall rehabilitation project as completed in FY 2018. The PMIS completion description included the statement that “[n]ew shade structures and picnic tables were purchased,” with no mention that the materials for the structures were in bundles on the ground rather than installed as planned (see Figure 2). The former superintendent digitally signed off on the completion report in the PMIS, but there is no indication of further oversight. While the shade shelters are intended for outdoor use and as such may still be usable, they cannot fulfill their intended purpose of protecting visitors from harsh weather conditions until installed.

**Figure 2: Shade Shelter Frames in 2019 Still Uninstalled Since FY 2015**



Source: OIG

We asked the facilities manager if she had solicited any bids for installation, and she said she had sought “ballpark quotes” from companies that were onsite for the other portions of the rehabilitation project. She could not provide records of any solicitation.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The failure to install major equipment purchases for more than 5 years highlights problems presented by inadequate management oversight of park personnel with the authority to make major facilities-related decisions. More than \$250,000 could have been put to better use, addressing more immediate deferred maintenance needs or other park priorities. Instead, the park used the funds to purchase equipment that, even if there was an immediate need, went unused in



warehouses and outdoor lots exposed to the elements for years, providing none of their intended benefits to the park, its staff, or its visitors.

We recommend that Big Bend National Park:

1. Develop and implement plans to increase management oversight of major facilities projects
2. Develop and implement a plan for the use or disposition of the equipment purchased to address the \$255,117 in funds that could have been put to better use

Please provide us with your written response to this report by March 6, 2020. The response should provide information on the actions you have taken or planned to address the recommendations, as well as target dates and titles of the officials responsible for implementing these actions. Please send your response to [aie\\_reports@doioig.gov](mailto:aie_reports@doioig.gov).

The legislation creating the Office of Inspector General requires that we report to Congress semiannually on all audit, inspection, and evaluation reports issued; actions taken to implement our recommendations; and recommendations that have not been implemented.

If you have any questions regarding this inspection report, please contact me at 202-208-5745.

Attachments (2)

## **Scope, Objective, and Methodology**

### **Scope and Objective**

We inspected purchases of air conditioning units and shade shelters at Big Bend National Park in Southwest Texas during fiscal years 2013 and 2015. Our objective was to determine if the information we received about funds being misspent were founded.

### **Methodology**

We conducted our inspection in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation as put forth by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. We believe that the work performed provides a reasonable basis for our conclusions and recommendations.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Gained an understanding of the claim we received about misspent funds at Big Bend National Park
- Interviewed park maintenance staff
- Interviewed the park's facilities manager
- Interviewed the current park superintendent and chief of administration
- Reviewed and analyzed purchase orders, project management reports, and other pertinent documentation associated with the purchases
- Requested and received photographs of the uninstalled equipment and other documentation from park management

We relied on data provided by the National Park Service to conduct this inspection.

**Funds To Be Put To Better Use**

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Equipment Type</b>	<b>Number Purchased</b>	<b>Value (\$)</b>
<b>2013</b>	HVAC units	4	27,426
<b>2014</b>	HVAC units	18	112,691
<b>2015</b>	Shade shelters	26	115,000
			<b>Total: \$255,117</b>

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