



### [Virgin Islands land eyed for historic site](#)

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The National Park Service hasn't yet decided whether it wants beachfront land in the U.S. Virgin Islands for a new national historic site, but House Democrats for the second time in two weeks will try to push the Park Service to do it, **at a potential eventual cost in the tens of millions of dollars.**

The first attempt, last week, failed after Republicans balked at the spending and mustered the votes to defeat the bill under rules requiring a two-thirds majority for passage — prompting Democrats to retaliate by defeating a bipartisan bill to repair broken water-diversion infrastructures in national forest land in Idaho.

"This may be as much symbolic as it was a statement from a lot of conservatives that you're spending too much money. It's time to prioritize," said Rep. Rob Bishop, Utah Republican, who led the floor fight against the Virgin Islands bill.

The vote blocking the designation was 241-173, or well short of the two-thirds majority needed to pass the bill under fast-track rules that don't allow any amendments. No Republicans voted for the measure, and four Democrats voted against it.

Immediately afterward, Democrats voted to block the Idaho waterways bill, sending it to defeat 225-191 under the same two-thirds rules.

It's the latest tiff over federal lands and land designations, which have become one of the more quietly contentious issues for Congress as Democrats seek to make up for what they consider lost time under the Bush administration.

It also marks another small-dollar spending battle as Congress weighs record deficits versus finite opportunities to preserve historic property.

The Virgin Islands project, on the island of St. Croix, would be called Castle Nugent National Historic Site. It's intended to preserve 2,900 acres of land and an additional 8,600 acres underwater that together include archeological sites, a barrier coral reef and historic cattle plantations.

The underwater lands are owned by the Virgin Islands, but the other lands are privately held and would have to be bought. That's what sparked the floor fight.

"This is not one that's egregious. If you're going to have a nice beachfront park and expand the one that's there, go for it, I guess," said Mr. Bishop. "But I also cannot give a great argument on why the federal government should be owning this property."

Republicans said the site can wait until after the Park Service finishes a study it's in the middle of — and which Congress itself mandated several years ago at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars — to determine if it's worthwhile.

That's what the Park Service wants, too, though they said their draft study suggests the site is indeed a good candidate for the designation.

"We would ask that the committee defer action on this legislation until the special resource study is completed, which is consistent with the department's general policy on legislation establishing a new unit of the national park system when a study is pending," Steve Whitesell, associated director for park planning, told a House committee last year.

The study is expected to be formally sent to Congress later this year.

A spokeswoman for the Virgin Islands' representative in Congress, Delegate Donna M.C. Christensen, didn't return a call for comment. But on the House floor last week, Mrs. Christensen said the local community supports the idea, but said it can't wait for the Park Service to finish its study.

"There is risk of losing the property if we don't move quickly," the Democrat said.

She also said Congress has acted before a full study was completed when it designated a memorial to those who died in the Oklahoma City bombing and designated President Ronald Reagan's boyhood home.

Democrats are slated to try again this week. They will bring the Virgin Islands bill to the floor under regular rules that require just a majority vote.

They said passing the bill to designate the land as a National Historic Site doesn't actually spend any money, but rather authorizes Congress to include spending in other bills in the future.

The Congressional Budget Office said to acquire the land and begin to put a management plan in place would cost \$26 million over the next five years, and total land acquisition could take 10 years and cost about \$45 million.

Managing the site would cost about \$1 million a year.

The Park Service in Washington last week referred calls about the legislative fight to its Atlanta office, which didn't return calls for comment.

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