

Audit shows State Parks violated payroll rules

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Dozens of employees at the state Department of Parks and Recreation were inappropriately paid for working outside their job classification, according to an audit by the State Controller's Office released Tuesday.

These "out-of-class" work assignments may have cost taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars beyond the misuse of funds at the department that has been previously reported.

The audit was triggered by a *Sacramento Bee* investigation, published in July, that revealed a secret vacation buyout program offered to employees at parks headquarters in Sacramento. This program cost taxpayers more than \$271,000, which would have been sufficient to save a half-dozen parks from closure as a result of state budget cuts.

The Controller's Office opted not to probe the vacation buyout further, saying prior investigations by internal auditors and the Attorney General's Office had been adequate. However, it did find that an additional three people received vacation buyout payments, for a total of 59. The amount of money paid to these additional three employees is not revealed.

The audit focuses primarily on other revelations involving parks employees allowed to work in positions above their usual pay grade, often done to temporarily fill a staff vacancy.

Auditors found 203 employees over a three-year period were assigned to these "out-of-class" assignments at state parks. It remains unclear whether all of these were improper, because the department did not follow required record-keeping procedures before approving the assignments.

In many cases, managers circumvented the usual process to approve out-of-class work assignments so that the employee could begin the assignment without the required paperwork.

The audit says this practice “presents a serious risk of abuse or fraud.”

“There’s a number of different rules that were violated here,” said Jacob Roper, a spokesman for the Controller’s Office.

Because of the inadequate documentation, the controller could not determine how much money was inappropriately paid to employees working above their pay grade. It directed the Parks Department to figure that out and seek reimbursement from the employees.

In one potential example, however, it found that 17 employees worked beyond the required 120-day limit in their out-of-class assignment. These cases, which clearly violate state rules, amounted to an expense of \$38,900.

In a Nov. 30 written response to the audit, Aaron Robertson, chief deputy director at state parks, said all the affected employees were qualified to work in the out-of-class assignments. The primary issue was that required procedures were not followed.

The letter states the department will seek reimbursement from employees who inappropriately received out-of-class salary payments.

“In general,” Robertson wrote, “we acknowledge and it is widely known that some very unfortunate events occurred at the Department of Parks and Recreation.”

