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NATIONAL PARKS

Plans to hike fees stir outrage

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A controversial plan to more than double most peak-season entry fees at 17 of the largest national parks is just the tip of the iceberg.

When the National Park Service unveiled its proposal Tuesday, park officials did not mention the long list of parks that have already moved to raise fees in 2018.

Since mid-June, individual parks have already made or finalized at least 40 separate plans to increase their gate and camping fees, according to a review of NPS records.

It suggests that parks across the country have been quick to respond to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's call to boost fees as a way to pay for long-delayed maintenance projects in the 417 national park sites.

"The best funds for the parks are through the door: tickets to the door," Zinke, who oversees the parks, told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in June.

Zinke is taking plenty of heat for his plan, which would force parkgoers to pay \$70 during the five busiest months to get into Yellowstone or Grand Canyon or other popular parks with a vehicle.

With NPS facing an \$11 billion backlog of deferred maintenance, critics say it would make much more sense to have Congress provide the fix.

"In 2015 and 2016, the National Park Service raised fees in over 100 parks throughout the country, many of which are being considered again for fee increases," said Emily Douce, budget and appropriations director for the National Parks Conservation Association, a pro-parks advocacy group.

Now, she said, the Trump administration "is calling on the national park visitors to foot the bill on fixing our national parks," noting that 16 of the 17 parks that would get hit with the new fee increase were among those that raised their fees in the last two years.

Maureen Finnerty, chairwoman of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, a group that represents more than 1,400 current and former NPS employees, said "the enormity of the increases exceeds any increases in the history of the National Park Service."

"We were shocked when we read the administration's proposal," she said. "Fees alone are not the answer to the budget problems."

And Ben Schreiber, senior political strategist for the environmental group Friends of the Earth, predicted that the plan would make national parks unaffordable for millions of Americans.

"The Trump administration is turning our national parks into an exclusive playground for the rich," he said.

The outcry is familiar for Jonathan Jarvis, the former NPS director in the Obama administration, who called the proposed fee structure "a big jump."

"The maintenance backlog has grown because the Park Service has been inadequately funded to deal with its physical facilities for a long time, for decades," he said. "And you're not going to catch up with a fee program unless you price these things completely out of reach — and that would be a tragedy."

Jarvis, who led NPS from 2009 to 2017, said NPS "ran into a fair amount of pushback" by raising fees during the George W. Bush administration. He imposed a moratorium that expired in 2014.

"I put a freeze on increases," Jarvis said. "We just let it settle for a while because we were really upsetting the public with fees."

Jeremy Barnum, the NPS acting chief of public affairs, defended the price hike, saying only 118 of the 417 national park sites now charge entry fees, while it's free to get into the remaining 299 sites. And he said that entry fees even predate the creation of the Park Service in 1916.

"Mount Rainier National Park started charging an entry fee in 1908," Barnum said. "Factoring in inflation, the \$5 entrance fee the park charged in 1914 would be the equivalent of a \$123 entrance fee today."

Shawn Regan, a research fellow at the Montana-based Property and Environment Research Center, a free-market environmental think tank, said NPS "is smart to consider ways to become less financially dependent on unreliable congressional appropriations."

"One of the best ways the agency can become more self-sufficient is to rely more on the very people who benefit most from the parks — the visitors themselves," he said.

Plans in progress

Zinke wants to raise \$70 million a year for infrastructure projects with the new plan, which would increase peak-season fees at the 17 top-revenue producing parks. The fees would go into effect at most parks in May or June of 2018.

Those parks, which now collect 70 percent of all entrance fees for NPS, include many of the most popular sites: Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Olympic, Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Zion, Acadia, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain, Shenandoah, and Joshua Tree national parks.

Under the new plan, peak-season entry fees at the 17 parks would be \$70 for a private vehicle, \$50 for a motorcycle and \$30 for a person on bike or foot. An annual pass for a park would cost \$75. Currently, vehicle fees at the 17 parks range from \$25 to \$30, while motorcycle fees range from \$12 to \$25. A person on bike or foot pays from \$10 to \$15, while a park-specific annual fee ranges from \$40 to \$60.

The other 40 proposals to raise fees, all listed among the planning documents on the NPS website, would affect many of the smaller park sites, including the Harry S. Truman National Historic Site, Mammoth Cave National Park, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Pinnacles National Park, Devils Tower National Monument, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Padre Island National Seashore and Little River Canyon National Preserve.

Some parks are on both lists. Arches National Park, for example, sought public comments on a proposal to raise its individual fee next year from \$10 to \$12 and its motorcycle entrance fee from \$15 to \$20, while keeping its vehicle entrance fee at \$25.

Barnum said that none of the separate plans announced earlier by individual parks would be affected by this week's proposal, which only deals with peak-season fees.

Some of the increases are due to a new fee structure created in 2006 that grouped NPS sites into four levels. The lowest tier includes national historic sites, military parks, battlefield parks, memorials and

shrines, and preserves and parkways. The second tier is for national seashores, recreation areas, monuments, lakeshores and historic parks. The third and fourth tiers include national parks. Under that plan, fees range from \$30 per vehicle or \$15 per person at the top tier to \$15 per vehicle and \$7 per person at the lowest end.

Barnum said parks that are currently in line with the pricing model are not changing their entrance fees, while parks that are not in line "have been and will continue to engage the public about potential fee increases." He said that since August of 2014, all park superintendents have annually been directed "to engage the public to move their entrance fees in-line with the pricing model, if supported by civic engagement."

Political fight

Both Jarvis and the National Parks Conservation Association criticized NPS for allowing only 30 days for the public to comment on the proposed fee hikes, from Tuesday through Nov. 23.

"That's not adequate," said Jarvis, who's now the executive director of the Institute for Parks, People and Biodiversity at the University of California, Berkeley.

Barnum, however, said 30 days "is a fairly standard public comment period" for NPS proposals.

On Capitol Hill, top Democrats who serve on key committees that oversee the national parks were quick to condemn the new fee plan.

Arizona Democratic Rep. Raúl Grijalva, the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, said the proposal comes after Trump's budget for 2018 called for a 13 percent cut to NPS. He asked the administration to work with Congress to increase federal funding for the parks instead of hiking fees.

"Secretary Zinke would rather take money directly out of the pockets of hardworking Americans instead of coming up with a serious budget proposal for the National Park System," Grijalva said. "More than doubling the vehicle entrance fee at Grand Canyon, as this proposal would do, or any other park is not a sustainable funding strategy."

Washington state Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell, the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, tied the issue to Zinke's use of charter and military flights while in office. Zinke defended his travels last month.

"While Secretary Zinke flies around on private jets using our taxpayer dollars, he is hiking up the fees all American families pay to enjoy our national parks," Cantwell said.

But Zinke said the fee increase will help address parks' aging infrastructure.

"Targeted fee increases at some of our most-visited parks will help ensure that they are protected and preserved in perpetuity and that visitors enjoy a world-class experience that mirrors the amazing destinations they are visiting," he said in a statement.