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Kaweah Commonwealth (Sequoia-Kings Canyon, CA)

Proposed park fee increase prompts flood of comments

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Massive increase looms for commercial operators

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By: John Elliott

In the first week of a public comment period, the Department of the Interior website has been flooded by more than 40,000 comments and there is still 20 days to go until the comment period closes. The huge public response is a reaction to a proposed series of across-the-board entrance-fee increases that will raise the current price entry to the 17 busiest national parks from \$30 to \$70 per private vehicle. Except for one, these national parks are all in the western states.

If the proposal is approved, small commercial tour operators will see their fees increase from the current \$75 per vehicle entry to more than four times that amount at \$370 per vehicle. The extra revenue, the Department of the Interior reported, will address the National Park Service maintenance backlog, estimated to be in the billions of dollars system-wide.

Woody Smeck, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks superintendent, said he's glad to see the public getting engaged in the process.

But Becky Bischoff, who with her husband, Paul, owns and operates Sequoia Sightseeing Tours in Three Rivers, said for small commercial operators like SST there is no way they will be able to continue to do business in the local parks during peak periods. The commercial fee hikes will not go into effect until May 2019. If approved, the entrance fees for private vehicles would take effect in 2018.

Locally, the proposed fee increases would cover a period of the five consecutive busiest months. The first park that would see an increase to \$70 for a passenger vehicle will be Joshua Tree National Park on January 1.

For 12 parks, including Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and Yosemite, the targeted fee increases are proposed to begin May 1, 2018. Four other national parks — Acadia, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain, and Shenandoah — would begin their five-month peak period on June 1.

In addition to the peak season \$70 per vehicle entry charge for all 17 parks, annual passes for specific parks will cost \$75; the motorcycle fee will be \$50; the per-person walk-in or bike-in fee will be \$30.

Currently, the park-specific annual pass for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks costs \$50 so locals who want the best buy should be sure to purchase an annual pass during non-peak months.

Commercial fee hikes— Sequoia Sightseeing Tours has been operating in Sequoia and Kings Canyon

National Parks for 16 years. They provide an invaluable service, driving the Generals Highway year-round so visitors don't have to negotiate the steep, narrow road.

They currently charge \$99 for an all-day tour and with a four-person minimum. Under the current fees, SST pays \$75 each time one of their 15-passenger vans enters the parks.

Under the proposed commercial fee increase that per-van entry fee would increase to \$370 per van from May 1 to September 30 and then would tally another \$5-per-person fee at the end of each season.

"If these proposed fees go into effect on May 1, 2019, we will be forced to go out of business," said Becky. "These excessive fees could not be passed onto the clients; it just doesn't pencil out."

The Bischoffs don't believe the fee hikes originated with the National Park Service, but are instead coming from the Department of the Interior as a way to make budget cuts.

"It's just another loss for the visitor," Becky continued. "Add into the equation the \$5 million in liability insurance coverage needed to operate on federal land, maintenance costs, and all the other costs of running a small business, and Sequoia Sightseeing Tours would have to cease operations."

Fee hikes might work for the 45-passenger tour buses, Becky said, but a vehicle that size is not even allowed to enter Sequoia National Park from Ash Mountain.

"It's been a busy season in 2017, and we're just starting to see all these years of hard work finally make this business pay," Becky Bischoff said. "There is no question the fee increases would put us out of business."