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National Park entrance fee increase could hurt local economy

Posted by: [Reggie Ellis](#) Posted date: **November 15, 2017**

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park makes up \$122 million of Tulare County's economy

By Reggie Ellis

TULARE COUNTY – A proposal to increase fees at 17 national parks could generate millions for improvements to the aging infrastructure of the most pristine and picturesque places in our country. But it may also sap the local tourism economy as more Californians sink below the poverty level.

On Oct. 24, the National Park Service (NPS) announced its plan to double most entrance fees and revised fees for road-based commercial tours during the five peak-season months. From May through September, the seven-day park pass would increase — meaning people can return or stay in the park for a week with no additional fee – would more than double from \$30 to \$70 per car. The commercial/bus tour fee would double in cost depending on size of the vehicle, with the largest buses (over 57 passengers) paying \$1200 per trip during the peak season. Motorcycle and walking entrance fees for the 7 day pass would also double to \$50 and \$30, respectively. The America the Beautiful pass, which provides admittance at all National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands, would remain at \$80 a year. A park-specific annual pass for any of the 17 parks would be available for \$75.

If implemented, estimates suggest that the pricing structure could increase national park revenue by \$70 million per year, a 34 percent increase over the \$200 million collected in Fiscal Year 2016. That would generate badly needed revenue for improvements to roads, bridges, campgrounds, waterlines, bathrooms, and other visitor services.

“The infrastructure of our national parks is aging and in need of renovation and restoration,” said U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. “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. We need to have the vision to look at the future of our parks and take action in order to ensure that our grandkids’ grandkids will have the same if not better experience than we have today. Shoring up our parks’ aging infrastructure will do that.”

Among the national parks being considered for the increase is Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (SEKI), which contributes significantly to Tulare County's economy. The National Park Service estimates that the more than 1.7 million average annual visitors to SEKI generate over \$122 million dollars in economic activity within 80 miles of the park. SEKI welcomed a record 1.8 million visitors which coincided with a \$380.5 million increase in travel spending in Tulare County, according to the Visalia Convention & Visitors Bureau's 2016 annual report.

Concerned with losing a significant portion of its tourism dollars, the Visalia City Council voted on Nov. 7 to submit a letter to the National Park Service protesting the peak-season fee increases. In her report to the Council, assistant city manager Leslie Caviglia stated concerns that the 130% increase in a single year not only seemed excessive but could have major unintended consequences on the local economy.

“Staff is concerned that the dramatic increase to the fee will make visiting the National Parks cost-prohibitive for many lower income individuals and families, and especially those in the San Joaquin

Valley where unemployment remains twice that of the State average and where wages are significantly lower than those in other parts of the State,” Caviglia stated. “In addition, just the publicity associated with the cost increase will likely send the message that the National Parks are not affordable for everyone, and could reduce the number of tourists visiting the Parks.”

The fees would only be increased at the 17 most visited parks. In addition to SEKI, the new fee structure would be implemented at Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Olympic, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion National Parks with peak season starting on May 1, 2018; in Acadia, Mount Rainier, Rocky Mountain, and Shenandoah National Parks with peak season starting on June 1, 2018; and in Joshua Tree National Park as soon as practicable in 2018.

Only 118 of the 417 National Parks Service sites charge an entrance fee. The other 299 national parks do not charge an entrance fee. Under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, 80% of an entrance fee remains in the park where it is collected. The other 20% is spent on projects in other national parks.

Entrance fees are not charged to visitors under 16 years of age or holders of Senior, Military, Access, Volunteer, or Every Kid in a Park (EKIP) passes.

And time is running out for the public to weigh in. The deadline to submit public comments on the peak-season entrance fee proposal is Nov. 23, 2017. Comments can be made on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) web site parkplanning.nps.gov/proposedpeakseasonfeerates. Written comments can be sent to 1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop: 2346 Washington, DC 20240.