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The Coloradan

National park entry fee hike could hurt RMNP

[Jacy Marmaduke](#), jmarmaduke@coloradoan.com Published 8:48 p.m. MT Dec. 14, 2017 | Updated 4:03 p.m. MT Dec. 15, 2017

You'd need a band of economists and a soothsayer to understand exactly how more-than-tripled peak season entry fees would affect Rocky Mountain National Park.

But Coloradoan research, including an interview with an economics professor who's researched national park visitation, highlighted a few potential impacts to America's fourth-most-visited national park. Not all of them are good.

The National Park Service unveiled a proposal this fall to increase Rocky's entry fees from \$20 to \$70 per private vehicle from June through October. Rocky is one of 17 parks included in the proposal, which would take effect for most parks this spring.

The entry fee hike is meant to address unmet park maintenance and repairs, otherwise known as deferred maintenance. Rocky's most-recent to-do list checks in at \$75 million worth of unmet needs, including road repairs, campground updates and work on waterlines and bathrooms. That makes Rocky No. 17 among national parks in deferred maintenance needs.

NPS estimates the pricing proposal — intended to provide parks with additional money in lieu of funding increases from Congress — will generate an additional \$70 million annually to address more than \$12 billion of unmet needs at national parks. The agency got to that number by analyzing entrance fee and visitation trends, NPS spokeswoman Kathy Kupper said.

But addressing park maintenance by increasing entry fees presents an economic dilemma.

The fee hike will drive away some visitors, predicted Colorado State University economics professor Stephan Weiler. It could also inspire visitors to buy a different kind of pass that results in less money going directly to Rocky.

Still, more-than-tripled entry fees during the park's busiest months could result in more annual funding for Rocky.

Not a 'trivial' increase

The easiest thing to predict about the fee hike is that it will encourage some visitors to look for cheaper routes to recreation, said Weiler, who's [researched national park visitation](#).

"It comes close to (quadrupling) the fees, and that's not trivial for some families," he said. "There are going to be people who live on the Front Range who shift to other alternatives. We know the places to go."

For far-away visitors, though, park entry fees are just a fraction of overall trip cost. Weiler said the entry fee increase could get lost in the shuffle of airfare, gas, food, hotels and camping fees. A [University of Montana study](#) reached a similar conclusion.

Many of Rocky's peak-season visitors are tourists. Park officials estimate about 70 percent of summertime visitors aren't from Colorado, spokeswoman Kyle Patterson said.

The last visitation survey, conducted in summer 2010 and winter 2011, found about three-fourths of summertime visitors were from outside Colorado. During the winter, the ratio flipped: Three-fourths of visitors were from Colorado.

America the Beautiful passes

The fee hike would make an America the Beautiful pass a “much more attractive option,” Weiler said. The pass gets one car-full of people (or four people on foot) into almost any federal recreation area, including national parks, for a year.

At \$80, the pass would almost immediately pay for itself in peak season if Rocky's daily fee increased to \$70 as suggested.

If a visitor buys the America the Beautiful pass at Rocky, the park gets to keep 80 percent of the revenue — just as it does for regular entry fee sales. The other 20 percent goes to projects at other national parks.

But if a visitor buys the pass online or at another park, Rocky gets none of the money directly when that person visits.

For online sales, money goes first to supporting the costs of running the America the Beautiful program. What's left is distributed back to federal agencies, including the National Park Service, based on where people use the passes. The NPS funding goes to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act Project Fund.

The fund helps pay for park projects, so some money could go to Rocky if the Department of the Interior so chooses, but America the Beautiful pass revenue can't be used on transportation projects.

One of Rocky's biggest-ticket items is its shuttle system, which served more than 700,000 park visitors this year. The system is funded only by Rocky-specific entry fees, Patterson said.

The park visitation bubble

National park visitation is at an all-time high, but that bubble could burst at some point.

A few factors could influence that, Weiler said. People tend to visit open spaces more during times of economic downturn because they're often a cheaper alternative to overseas or big-city vacations. That's one reason national park visitation was so high during the Great Recession.

Rocky has set a visitation record four out of the last five years, but visitation is down about 2 percent from last year as of the end of November, Patterson said. The park will log its second-highest annual visitation if it doesn't set another record in 2017.

As more and more people visit national parks, though, growing crowds and swelling deferred maintenance could make the parks less alluring to visitors.

“There's this hypothetical crowding point,” Weiler said. “Rocky has a couple of different access points, but there's some really heavily used portions. At what point does a park become too good for itself?”

Beyond Rocky

The fee increase, if finalized, will have untold impacts on 16 other highly visited parks.

Peak season fees would also be implemented from May through October at Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Olympic, Sequoia & Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite and Zion national parks. Peak season fees would be implemented from June through October at Acadia, Mount Rainier and Shenandoah national parks. Joshua Tree National Park would see the new fee system "as soon as practicable" in 2018, according to an NPS press release.

NPS at least partly used visitation numbers to select affected parks, and popular parks tend to have

bigger maintenance backlogs. Of the 17 parks with proposed fee increases, 15 are among the 20 most-visited national parks.

There are a few wildcards: Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska ranks No. 31 for visitation but would see fee increases. Canyonlands National Park in Utah ranks No. 26 for visitation and would also see an increase.

The National Park System includes 417 areas, nearly 60 of which carry the "national park" designation. America's most-visited national park by a landslide, Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, saw more than 11 million visitors last year. That's about double the visitation of second-fiddle Grand Canyon National Park.

Great Smoky Mountains has a maintenance backlog of more than \$211 million, the fourth-highest of all national parks, but the park can't increase entry fees because it doesn't charge for entry. The park could only begin charging admission by an act of the Tennessee Legislature.

A few other highly visited parks with big maintenance backlogs were left off the fee-increase list, including Hawai'i Volcanoes (No. 14), Death Valley (No. 20) and Cuyahoga Valley (No. 12).

[The public has until Dec. 22 to comment on the proposed fee increases](#) thanks to a 30-day extension to the public comment deadline.

You can submit comments on the proposal on the National Park Service's Planning, Environment and Public Comment website, parkplanning.nps.gov/proposedpeakseasonfeerates. Written comments can be sent to 1849 C St., NW, Mail Stop: 2346 Washington, D.C. 20240.

As of late November, more than 65,000 comments had been submitted.

Fewer free days in 2018

In other national parks news, the number of free admission days to national parks that regularly charge admission, including Rocky, will be cut by more than half in 2018.

There will be four free admission days in 2018: Jan. 15 (Martin Luther King Jr. Day), April 21 (first day of National Park Week), Sept. 22 (National Public Lands Day) and Nov. 11 (Veterans Day). [The dates were announced on the NPS website.](#)

[There were 10 admission-free days this year and 16 in 2016,](#) according to an article by the Associated Press.

Affected parks:

- Yellowstone: No. 6 in visitation, \$663.3 million deferred maintenance
- Yosemite: No. 3 in visitation, \$555.1 million deferred maintenance
- Grand Canyon: No. 2 in visitation, \$353.4 million deferred maintenance
- Grand Teton: No. 9 in visitation, \$190.8 million deferred maintenance
- Olympic: No. 7 in visitation, \$152.2 million deferred maintenance
- Mount Rainier: No. 19 in visitation, \$152.1 million deferred maintenance
- Glacier: No. 10 in visitation, \$148.3 million deferred maintenance
- Sequoia & Kings Canyon: No. 15 in visitation, \$145.4 million deferred maintenance
- Shenandoah: No. 18 in visitation, \$75.7 million deferred maintenance
- Rocky Mountain: No. 4 in visitation, \$75.1 million deferred maintenance
- Acadia: No. 8 in visitation, \$71 million deferred maintenance
- Zion: No. 5 in visitation, \$70 million deferred maintenance

- Denali: No. 31 in visitation, \$50.3 million deferred maintenance
- Canyonlands: No. 26 in visitation, \$45.2 million deferred maintenance
- Joshua Tree: No. 11 in visitation, \$35.5 million deferred maintenance
- Bryce Canyon: No. 13 in visitation, \$27.5 million deferred maintenance
- Arches: No. 16 in visitation, \$24.7 million deferred maintenance

Source: NPS 2016 visitation statistics and fiscal year 2016 deferred maintenance data

Proposed fee increases

The NPS proposal would increase peak season entrance fees at Rocky to \$70 per private vehicle, \$50 per motorcycle and \$30 per person on bike or foot starting June 1, 2018. Peak season is the busiest five-month period of visitation at a park — for Rocky, that's June through October.

The proposal also includes a peak season commercial entry fee structure that would go into effect after an 18-month implementation window. Details are available at parkplanning.nps.gov/commercialtourrequirements.