On Oct. 24, the National Park Service (NPS) announced a proposed entrance fee of $70 at 17 of its 59 national parks. Touted as a remedy to the NPS’s massive maintenance backlog, the additional revenue is meant to address aging infrastructure in the parks, including roads, bridges, campgrounds, waterlines, bathrooms and other visitor services. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke claims it “will help ensure [our most popular parks] are protected and preserved in perpetuity.” More likely, the proposal is the next move in a systematic effort by a hostile administration to further undermine and dismantle America’s public lands system.

The fee increase is not only unlikely to significantly reduce the maintenance backlog, it hardly seems designed to do so. As many have pointed out, the estimated $70 million per year additional revenue pales in comparison to the staggering $11-$12 billion of deferred maintenance the NPS reports, $2.27 billion of which is deemed critical. It also pales in comparison to $400 million President Trump has proposed to cut from the NPS budget.

Additionally, under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, 80 percent of revenue from entrance fees must stay in the park at which it was collected, meaning that the advantages of the fee increase would go primarily to the parks named on the proposal. However, the 17 parks targeted are neither the 17 most visited parks, nor the 17 parks with the highest tallies for deferred maintenance. Amazingly, Great Smoky Mountain National Park, the most visited national park (by a factor of two), and the national park with the fifth highest deferred maintenance costs, is currently free to enter, and not on the list for Zinke’s fee hike.

Moreover, the proposal focuses only on national parks, which comprise just 59 of the 417 areas managed by the NPS. Of the 20 NPS areas with the greatest deferred maintenance, 10 are not national parks at all. If the intent of Zinke’s proposal is truly to address infrastructural needs in our most popular parks, these oversights are inexplicable.

If, however, Zinke is trying to create circumstances under which an administration hostile to public lands could claim that the federal government and the American people cannot properly or sufficiently steward its national parks, this proposal is one way to go about it.

As many have pointed out, a $70 day-use fee is likely to be prohibitively expensive for many visitors. David Smith, superintendent for Joshua Tree National Park, says for “a lot of people that $25 [entrance fee is] a major commitment,” reporting that “a lot of them try to turn around desperately so they … can go in somewhere in the park where there’s not a fee station.” Now imagine if that fee was nearly tripled.

Pricing people out while continuing to not address critical infrastructural needs erodes support for the parks and creates a situation where deficit-conscious politicians may begin to call for increased profits, or the cutting of losses. Maybe some parks are opened to resource extraction, maybe others are sold off. Congressman Jared Polis said of the proposal, “This is a direct attempt to cut people off from our public lands. … Making [national parks] more expensive is the first part of an overriding agenda to privatize public lands.”
The Trump administration has already launched attacks against Forest Service lands, BLM lands and National Monuments, making them harder to defend and easier to exploit for their resources. Undermining the national parks is simply the final piece in an agenda that has consistently defunded and deregulated public lands, and is even trying to revoke their protection entirely.

This particular attack may have come more subtly and slowly, because of the broad bipartisan support the parks enjoy, but we cannot be fooled. Zinke urges us to “have the vision to look at the future of our parks and take action in order to ensure [their protection].” We need to have the vision to see this proposal for what it is: at best, an inadequate measure that would price people out of access to land they hold the rights to, and at worst, a slow poison designed to sabotage what many still refer to as “America’s Best Idea.” And then we need to take action.

A public comment period on the proposed fee increase will be open until Nov. 23, 2017, on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment website: parkplanning.nps.gov/proposedpeakseasonfeerates. Written comments can be sent to 1849 C Street, NW, Mail Stop: 2346 Washington D.C., 20240.

*This opinion column does not necessarily reflect the views of Boulder Weekly.*