



## **Comment on Improving Visitor Services in National Parks, NPS-2025-0037**

Property and Environment Research Center (PERC)

Bozeman, Montana

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### **Main Points**

- National parks have long faced challenges related to insufficient funding, heavy visitation that strains infrastructure, and enormous maintenance backlogs.
- Creativity can help overcome long-standing challenges of stewarding national parks and ultimately improve the visitor experience.
- Implementing an international visitor surcharge will provide additional, recurring resources for park management and operations.
- Each park is unique and requires a balance between local solutions and federal accountability. Amending blanket policies would give superintendents much-needed flexibility.
- Parks budgets and staff are already stretched thin. Harnessing more public-private partnerships can increase capacity for park stewardship.
- Improving maintenance strategies will ensure parks are in good condition for visitors and will protect the value of recent investments for the long term.

### **Introduction**

The Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) respectfully submits this comment in response to the National Park Service's request for information about how the service can better serve park visitors and further President Trump's Executive Order 14314, "Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks." PERC is the national leader in market solutions for conservation, with over 45 years of research and a network of respected scholars and practitioners. Through research, law and policy, and innovative field conservation programs, PERC explores how aligning incentives for environmental stewardship produces sustainable outcomes for land, water, and wildlife. Our work has long supported creative solutions to steward national parks while providing a quality visitor experience for the public.

Since the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, visitors have flocked to parks to enjoy the natural wonders of the United States. Recently, park visitation has exploded, growing by more than 20 percent in the

three years leading up to the 2016 centennial. Since then, visitation has remained high, reaching 330 million visits in several years. Numerous factors have contributed to this growth, including notable advertising campaigns to promote the parks.

While visitor impacts vary from park to park, with high-profile units and popular areas within parks receiving a disproportionate amount of pressure, the challenges of increased visitation have compounded longstanding maintenance needs. Visitors find themselves waiting in lines, driving on crumbling bridges, or using dilapidated facilities. National park superintendents and employees face increased maintenance costs and logistical challenges like difficulty finding housing. Natural resources—the main draw for visitors—are also harmed as more visitors mean more pressure on wildlife, more garbage, and more people venturing out of designated areas.

Ensuring the public gets to enjoy our public lands is a complicated challenge that will require creative solutions to generate additional revenues, bolster capacity, and devise systems to effectively and efficiently care for the wide range of assets and resources found throughout the National Park System.

### **Innovate with Visitor Management**

As visitation rises, simply expanding access is no longer viable. Parks must adopt smarter tools to manage when, where, and how people visit. That doesn't mean turning people away—it means making visits better.

Timed-entry systems, reservation platforms, and shuttle services can all help reduce bottlenecks and distribute crowds more evenly. But innovation should be iterative: Not every solution works everywhere, and systems should be designed with flexibility in mind. Offering a mix of advanced reservations and walk-up availability, for instance, accommodates both planners and spontaneous travelers.<sup>1</sup>

Zion National Park, for example, has been a leader in adapting to booming visitation. The park launched a mandatory shuttle system in 2000 to eliminate private vehicle traffic from Zion Canyon and dramatically improved the visitor experience. The park has since layered on digital tools, including real-time crowd- and parking-trackers via mobile apps to help visitors avoid congestion and make more informed choices. Zion also pioneered permit management for high-demand trails with its lottery system for the popular Angels Landing hike. This approach of blending infrastructure, digital tools, and demand-based access demonstrates how parks can take a holistic view of managing extreme popularity.

### **International Visitor Fees**

The National Park Service manages 433 sites, including iconic parks such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon. After recent booms in visitation, however, many of America's national parks are struggling to keep pace with their popularity. Visitor fees offer a direct and sustainable mechanism to steward sites straining

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<sup>1</sup> Tate Watkins, "[Unimpaired for the Enjoyment of Future Generations](#)," PERC Reports (August 2025).

under visitation because as visits rise, so does revenue devoted to parks. Fees also depoliticize funding because they are spent where they're collected without being subject to congressional appropriation.

Prior to the covid pandemic, roughly 14 million international visitors frequented U.S. national parks annually. Yet foreign visitors pay the same entry fees as U.S. residents, even though their ability and willingness to pay are generally higher. This approach misses an opportunity to link park funding more closely with visitation demand—and adopt a strategy common at national parks in dozens of other countries around the world.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the current fee structure does not account for variability in visitor profiles, trip costs, or the strain on park resources caused by different groups.



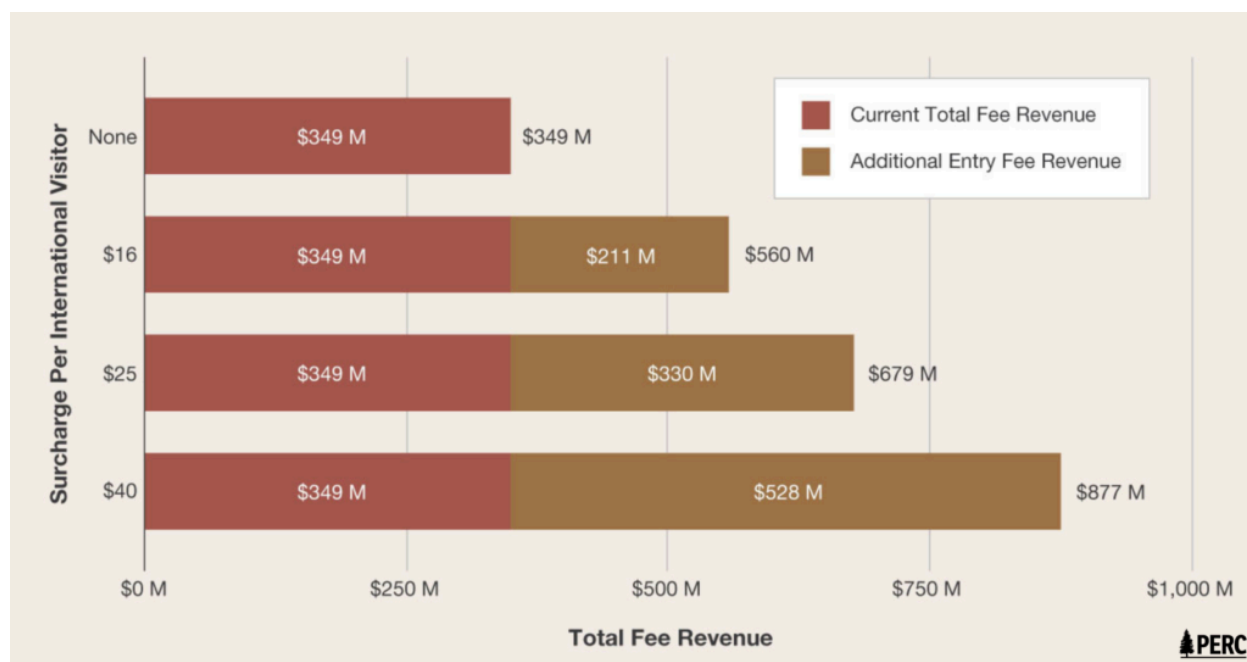
On July 3, 2025, President Donald Trump issued the executive order “Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks” directing Interior Secretary Doug Burgum to develop an international visitor fee surcharge strategy. This is a welcome move long supported by PERC to generate significant revenue for the National Park System.<sup>3,4</sup> Critically, 80 percent of revenue from entry fees remain where collected to be spent without further congressional appropriation, with the remainder retained within the National Park Service to help fund other sites. Additional revenue from an international surcharge would therefore directly improve the

<sup>2</sup> Tate Watkins, “[How Overseas Visitors Can Help Steward Our National Parks](#),” Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), December 21, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Kat Dwyer, “[President Trump Issues Executive Order Codifying PERC’s Proposal to Increase International Visitor Fees for National Parks](#),” Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), July 3, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Tate Watkins, “[How Overseas Visitors Can Help Steward Our National Parks](#),” Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), December 21, 2023.

visitor experience by providing needed resources for better-maintained facilities and long-overdue repairs and upgrades.



The Department of the Interior and the National Park Service should move forward to implement the executive order across fee collection sites. Implementing this policy will require minimal changes to fee collection systems and evidence suggests surcharges would have minimal impact on visitation at high-profile parks while potentially doubling their current fee revenues.<sup>5</sup>

### Flexibility With Accountability

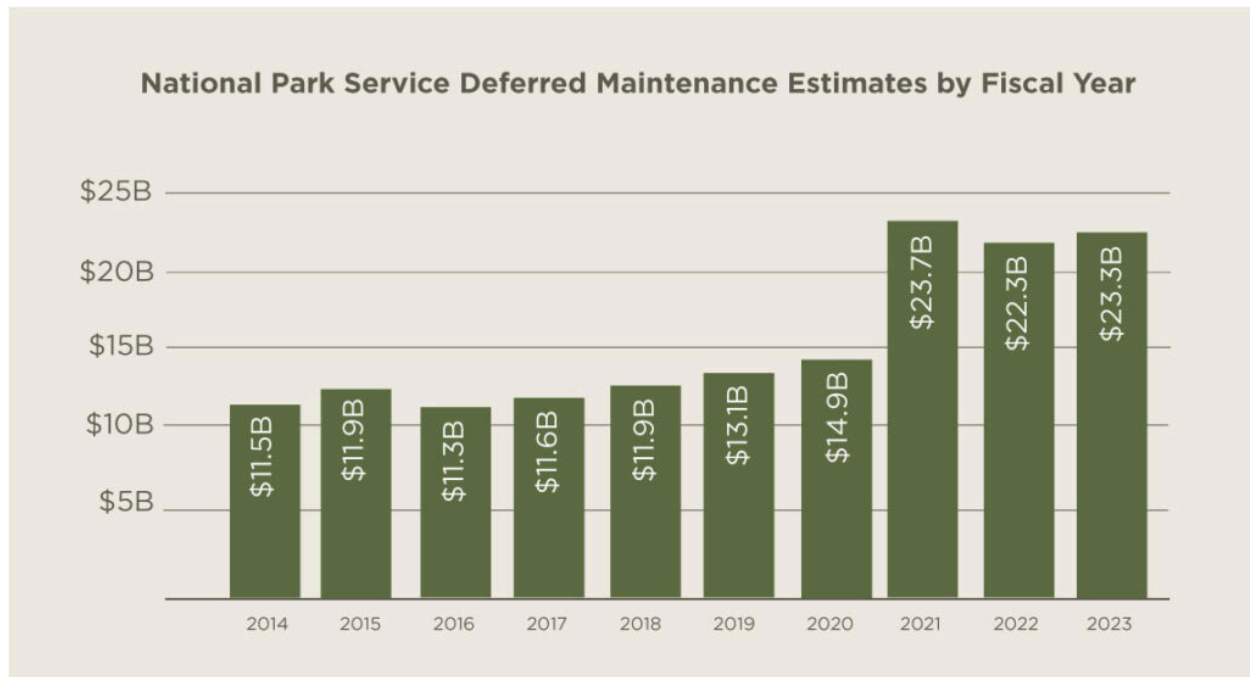
National parks face nearly \$23 billion in deferred maintenance, with critical issues ranging from eroding trails to failing water systems. The root of the backlog is neglect of the routine maintenance essential for visitor safety and park preservation. Local park leadership is best positioned to understand and address their parks' unique challenges. By granting superintendents greater autonomy and holding them accountable, the department will empower local solutions and stop digging a maintenance hole.

Bureaucratic mandates hinder local managers from addressing maintenance and operational needs. For example, a rule requiring 55 percent of fee revenues go toward deferred maintenance limits flexibility and discourages proactive upkeep.<sup>6</sup> It signals that parks should wait until something falls apart before addressing it. Similarly, superintendents lack the ability to adjust staffing and operations to fit their needs. While reducing the massive

<sup>5</sup> Sara Sutherland, Tate Watkins, and Stephen Newbold, "The Economics of Awe: Exploring Entrance Fee Options at the World's Oldest National Park," Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), June 26, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> PERC, "President Trump Issues Executive Order."

backlog may be beyond individual park leaders, granting them more authority while holding them accountable can help prevent further increases.



Likewise, park superintendents should be given greater flexibility to use fees to meet staffing needs and make operational decisions while being held accountable for their actions. Empowering local managers to adjust staffing levels will help manage seasonal visitation peaks and result in more efficient and effective park operations generally.

### **Public-Private Partnerships**

At a time where the National Park Service is facing growing visitor needs, public-private partnerships can provide a powerful means of stretching parks' limited funds further. For instance, when park rangers' valuable time is taken up performing routine tasks such as cleaning comfort stations and emptying trash cans, they have less capacity to devote to specialized services they are uniquely qualified to deliver to visitors. Ultimately, visitors' experiences are diminished, and park staff are stretched thin. Public-private partnerships are a useful tool to, where appropriate, outsource routine park operations and management needs to the private sector while maintaining public ownership and oversight.

Such partnerships are performance-based contracts designed by the agency to outsource certain management responsibilities. The agency defines the rules, parameters for visitor fees (if applicable), management goals, and maintenance expectations. The lessee can do things like conduct maintenance on roads and infrastructure or

collect visitor fees and oversee facilities in campgrounds. At a time when agency capacity and resources are limited, bringing in private partners can ensure a quality visitor experience.<sup>7</sup>

Expanding public-private partnerships for outdoor recreation was a core component of the EXPLORE Act (Public Law 118-234) signed on January 4, 2025. More recently, Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum signed Secretarial Order 3435 - Implementation of the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act on June 25, 2025, including a focus on private sector coordination. The National Park Service should proactively use these authorities to modernize management and operations where appropriate, improve facilities, develop infrastructure, and maintain recreation opportunities.

### **Expand Partnership Parks**

Despite an enormous deferred maintenance backlog, the National Park Service continues to grow. Adding new units without a sound plan to fund and maintain them adequately stretches park budgets even thinner and adds to the existing challenges of the agency's deferred maintenance backlog. As the National Park Service explores ways to improve the visitor experience while responsibly spending resources, it's time to think outside the box. Instead of simply creating new parks, the service should build on its partnership parks model by which parks would be owned, funded, and managed by private entities under standards and parameters established by the National Park Service.<sup>8</sup>

If proposed parks warrant national park status, they could be granted the national park title but remain owned and operated under private management. Under such an approach, park proponents would have a new way to establish national parks without further taxing federal management and funding resources. Operating like a franchisee, the private party—a nonprofit organization, business, or group of individuals—would maintain ownership of the site and would operate and manage it as a national park unit. The National Park Service would provide a license for such entities to operate under the national park “brand,” subject to federal oversight, and monitor the private managers to ensure parks are managed in accordance with the agency's mission.<sup>9</sup>

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas provides an example of what the partnership park approach looks like. The nearly 11,000-acre preserve is jointly managed by the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy, with the service owning just 30 acres of the preserve's land. This model should be more commonly used and expanded to allow parks to be fully owned and managed by a private entity while still abiding by National Park Service standards.

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<sup>7</sup> Shawn Regan, Reed Watson, Holly Fretwell, and Leonard Gilroy, *Breaking the Backlog: 7 Ideas to Address the National Park Deferred Maintenance Problem*, PERC Public Lands Report (February 16, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Laura B. Comay, “National Park System: Unites Managed Through Partnerships,” Congressional Research Service R42125 (April 5, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Shawn Regan, Reed Watson, Holly Fretwell, and Leonard Gilroy, *Breaking the Backlog: 7 Ideas to Address the National Park Deferred Maintenance Problem*, PERC Public Lands Report (February 16, 2016).

## Protecting Great American Outdoors Act Investments

The Great American Outdoors Act created the Legacy Restoration Fund, which has provided \$1.3 billion annually over the past five years to address deferred maintenance in National Park Service units. As Congress considers the future of the Legacy Restoration Fund, the department should work with Congress to retain aspects that have proven useful and successful.

- *Interest earnings:* The GAOA Project Management Office has highlighted the importance of the ability to earn interest from the Legacy Restoration Fund through U.S. Treasuries, which helps pay for administrative costs and cover project cost overruns. The fund had earned approximately \$77 million in interest as of fiscal year 2023 and is expected to earn an additional \$197 million in fiscal year 2024. Interest earnings have already covered all administrative costs of GAOA at the department and agency levels.<sup>10</sup>
- *Long-term flexibility:* The Government Accountability Office has praised the general flexibility of the Legacy Restoration Fund, noting that it does not expire nor need to be spent in a particular time frame. That flexibility helps given that many construction projects are long term, and often there are contractor delays or price increases due to inflation.<sup>11</sup>
- *Nimble workforce:* The Government Accountability Office has also praised agencies' ability to use funds to maintain, train, and expand internal maintenance teams who complete straightforward tasks and practice various trades at small scale with relatively quick turnarounds. Examples of work performed by these "maintenance action teams" include rebuilding trail boardwalks, rehabilitating window shutters on historic buildings, preserving historic aqueducts, and removing debris.<sup>12</sup> For smaller, simpler projects that may not warrant the time and complexity required to navigate federal bidding and contracting processes, internal teams have been able to carry out work more quickly and at a lower cost than would have been the case with contracted work.<sup>13</sup>
- *Contingency funding:* The Government Accountability Office notes another benefit is the inclusion of contingency funds that can be used to deal with unforeseen cost overruns if certain requirements are met. These contingency funds allow agencies more flexibility to deal with inflation and other challenges and address deferred maintenance.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, given that the Legacy Restoration Fund has already devoted billions of dollars to national parks, it makes little sense to have invested such significant resources into projects only for agencies to fail to steward the assets rehabilitated and built through them. The department should work with Congress to ensure a sufficient portion of any future funding is dedicated to maintaining and protecting the value of investments made over the

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<sup>10</sup> Tate Watkins, "[A Path Forward for America's Best Idea: Lessons Learned for Our National Parks from the Great American Outdoors Act](#)," Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), November 13, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Deferred Maintenance: Agencies Generally Followed Leading Practices in Selections but Faced Challenges* (GAO-24-106495, Jan. 2024), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. (GAO)

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, "[Maintenance Action Teams](#)," accessed June 10, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> GAOA, *Deferred Maintenance: Agencies Generally Followed Leading Practices*.

past five years.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Path Forward for Maintenance**

The National Park Service should replace the broken deferred maintenance system and terminology to improve how maintenance is prioritized. The National Park Service's several-decade old system to estimate, track, and report deferred maintenance has failed. The Government Accountability Office and the Interior Department's inspector general have called the system into question on various counts. Because the system is illogical, inaccurate, and unexplainable, it is indefensible. The agency is in the process of updating its system to one based partly on quick visual checks, known as parametric condition assessments. The agency should harness the logical aspects of its emerging approach, such as the efficient parametric assessments and reliance on a preexisting Federal Highway Administration inspection framework, and completely implement a new system for estimating its maintenance needs.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps just as importantly, the agency should also reframe the issue more logically and accurately by developing new terminology to discuss maintenance, whether it be routine, deferred, or otherwise. Rather than arbitrary measures of what merits a project becoming "overdue," the ultimate focus should be on less-subjective factors — such as safety and visitation. The National Park Service should assess what assets would fail absent attention and weigh the risk of failure in conjunction with how seriously and how many people would be impacted in the event of infrastructure failure.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach would suggest that, for instance, assets like highly trafficked bridges and roads, overnight facilities, and wastewater treatment facilities would be prioritized. Likewise, ensuring sufficient availability of safe and quality employee housing would be prioritized given that at many parks, serving visitors hinges on being able to hire, house, and retain employees in agency housing.

The challenge is that prioritizing thousands of agency projects in this way has become virtually impossible with a broken system. New terminology, framing, and communication of the issue will not only help the agency manage parks but also explain its maintenance needs and their prioritization to Congress, taxpayers, and visitors.

### **Conclusion**

Americans love our national parks. Creative tools like those discussed here will help ensure our parks are well maintained, well funded, and well staffed to provide visitors with a quality, unforgettable experience.

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<sup>15</sup> Tate Watkins, "[A Path Forward for America's Best Idea: Lessons Learned for Our National Parks from the Great American Outdoors Act](#)," Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), November 13, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Watkins, "[A Path Forward for America's Best Idea](#)."

<sup>17</sup> Watkins, "[A Path Forward for America's Best Idea](#)."