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RESPONSIBILITY

Ensuring Strong Federal Leadership for Our National Parks

Retaining strong federal leadership and standards in the National Park Service (NPS) is critical to safeguarding the integrity, safety and educational value of our national parks. But recent efforts to drastically reduce NPS staffing and propose privatizing operations threaten to shift the agency's mission from public stewardship to profit, undermining both resource protection and visitor experience. Together, these two actions erode the foundational federal leadership and accountability that protect park resources, support visitors, and ensure the National Park Service's mission endures for future generations. Privatization has never been and will never be the answer for a thriving National Park System.

From our 433 national parks to thousands of state parks and local trails, Americans depend on public lands for health, happiness and connection to nature. Outdoor recreation now fuels over \$1.2 trillion in annual economic activity and continues to grow. In fact, [reports show](#) surging demand and bipartisan support for preserving, expanding and investing in these spaces. And meeting that demand requires expanding the dedicated federal workforce and leadership and increasing funding and resources, not gutting the agency from the inside out.

What's Happening

- **Reduced Staffing:** Since January, NPS has [lost 24% of its permanent staff](#), including key positions in business services that are essential to the day-to-day operations of the National Park System. Cuts to business services staff undermine the essential business functions that support park infrastructure, resource protection and visitor services.
- **Compensation Reductions:** Proposals to cut various federal employee compensation components would worsen existing recruitment and retention challenges. Even with current benefits, NPS salaries, especially in urban areas, already lag significantly behind comparable roles in local governments or the private sector.
- **Politicizing Positions:** A proposed policy shift would subject senior NPS positions to political loyalty requirements. By reclassifying park employees to [Schedule F status](#) to remove job protections, it's possible to fire anyone regardless of performance or tenure. The result is a devastating loss of experience, expertise and institutional knowledge.
- **Budget Cuts:** The administration's FY26 budget proposal includes a \$900 million cut to NPS operations, which would be the largest cut in Park Service's 109-year history. Cuts of this magnitude could [shutter at least 350 national parks sites](#) across the country – more than 75% of our Park System – that protect our nation's irreplaceable history and culture and inspire and educate millions of people every year.

Why it Matters

- **Privatization risks long-term resource degradation and impacts to visitor services.** Unlike private entities, the NPS is not driven by profit which allows the agency to make decisions grounded in the best interests of the parks and the American public. While

commercial partners help enhance visitor services, it's the NPS's impartial leadership, strong standards, professional oversight and expertise that ensure parks run efficiently, transparently and in a way that supports the NPS mission to protect park resources and provide high-quality visitor experiences.

- **Public safety could suffer from fewer law enforcement rangers and privatized security.** With fewer law enforcement rangers on-site, response times for injuries or emergencies will increase, putting visitors at greater risk. Reduced funding also means fewer interpretive and law enforcement rangers to provide safety information and enforce precautions, leading to more accidents and harm to sensitive park areas.
- **Private contracts may cost more over time and deliver lower quality services.** Outsourcing functions often costs more over time. Contractors must turn a profit, which can drive up prices and reduce service quality, safety and resource protection. A 1980s federal review found that contracting rarely saved money compared to in-house staff, reinforcing the value of keeping skilled NPS employees on the job.
- **Reduced government oversight would make it harder to maintain accurate and transparent records of how public funds are spent.** Federal leadership ensures that spending decisions remain accountable to taxpayers and aligned with legal mandates. Privatization and staffing cuts weaken these safeguards, undermining trust in how national parks are managed and funded.

Case Examples

The NPS offers abundant business opportunities that support its core mission, deliver high-quality visitor services and benefit local economies. While NPS staff manage essential government functions and resource protection, business partners enhance the visitor experience without compromising federal oversight or stewardship.

- NPS manages over 500 concession contracts generating \$1.6 billion in revenue and returning ~\$180 million annually to national parks.
- Currently, the NPS executes thousands of Commercial Use Authorizations, allowing smaller businesses to provide visitor services with NPS oversight, such as river outfitters, guided jeep tours, bicycle tours, hiker shuttles, and many more. Portions of the profit may be returned to the NPS.
- Historic property leases shift maintenance costs to tenants while supporting visitor services, including cafes in Colonial National Historical Park, event rentals at Gateway National Recreation Area, and spas and breweries in Hot Springs National Park.

Call to Action

To protect the future of our national parks, Congress must reaffirm and strengthen the NPS' leadership. This means prohibiting the privatization of core functions, ending the hiring freeze, and restoring the staffing and institutional expertise needed to fulfill the agency's mission. Congress must uphold the NPS' legal responsibilities and increase the agency's operations, starting with the restoration of FY25 hiring.