Understaffed and Under Threat: The Case for Restoring Park Service Workforce

The National Park Service (NPS) is experiencing a staffing crisis with the current workforce level at a historic low. Since January 2025, NPS has lost 24% of its permanent workforce. And that's on top of a 20% decline since 2010. These losses, driven by a hiring freeze, pressured buyouts and retirements, and a pending reduction in force, are devastating the agency's ability to protect park resources, ensure visitor safety and deliver basic services.

Despite record visitation—331.9 million visits in 2024 alone—and growing demand for access to public lands, the Park Service is being asked to do more with far less. Congress must step in to stop further damage, reverse harmful cuts and restore NPS staffing capacity now, before it's too late.

What's Happening

- **Staff Reductions**: NPS has lost 4,000 staff due to terminations, pressured buyouts, deferred resignations and early retirement buyouts. This has left parks severely understaffed during peak visitation, putting visitor centers, trail maintenance and public safety at risk when help is needed most.
- **Hiring Freeze**: An ongoing hiring freeze --just extended to October this Monday--has delayed seasonal hiring and severely limited the agency's ability to fill vacant positions, including more than 100 superintendent positions. Of the nearly 8,000 positions pledged by the administration, only about 4,500 seasonal positions have been filled.
- **DOI Consolidation**: Interior Secretary Burgum ordered the consolidation of key administrative functions—IT, communications, finance, human resources and contracting—into the Office of the Secretary. This move has stripped NPS of essential staff capacity, disrupted park operations and created significant accountability gaps. As the transfer proceeds, NPS is being charged $2,000 plus 111% of each consolidated employee's salary and benefits, diverting critical resources from an already underfunded agency.
- **Reduction in Force**: These staffing challenges are unfolding under the cloud of a potential reduction in force, adding to the widespread uncertainty across the agency. Thousands more jobs remain at risk due to the administration's short-sighted push to shrink the federal workforce. The Supreme Court just ruled that a reduction in force can proceed.

Why it Matters

- **Safety Threats**: Reduced emergency staff slows response to medical calls, fires and search-and-rescue operations. Prior to January 20th, permanent law enforcement ranger staffing had already decreased 21% from 2010 to 2023, while the number of visitors increased 16% during the same period.

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- **Resource Risk**: Fewer staff to monitor and protect natural and cultural resources increases the threat of theft, vandalism and long-term degradation. Park staff are being pulled from their duties monitoring resources and conducting critical research in order to clean bathrooms or cover shifts outside their jobs.
- **Loss of Access**: In national parks across the country, from Yosemite to Assateague, staffing shortages have led to reduced hours at visitor centers, delayed maintenance and fewer educational programs.
- **Economic Impact**: Each year park visitors spend roughly $26.4 billion in local communities, but staff shortages jeopardize this economic engine. When the visitor experience suffers, so do the communities that rely on park tourism.

Case Examples

- Every building at **Yosemite National Park's** Pioneer History Center was forced to close after several artifacts were stolen, a consequence of dangerously low staffing.
- An estimated 60 staffers from the **National Park Service's regional offices in Alaska**, who provide vital oversight and expertise for Alaska's 54 million acres of national parkland, are gone.
- **Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park** is unable to fill 24 of the park's 74 positions. All custodial staff have been terminated, so other, higher graded maintenance employees are being directed away from their regular duties to perform custodial functions.
- **The National Parks of Boston**, which are hosting thousands of visitors for America 250 celebrations, have over 50 vacancies for full-time employees.

Call to Action

The loss of NPS staff is not improving government efficiency. It's endangering visitors, degrading treasured resources and dismantling over a century of conservation success. Congress must act now to stop the erosion of America's national parks and restore the staffing and support these places need:

1. **End the hiring freeze**, support legislation to prevent future freezes, and require all vacant positions to be filled within four months.
2. **Oppose any NPS-wide reduction in force** and require a legal review of its validity.
3. **Mandate transparency** by requiring NPS to report workforce levels by park, region and program, alongside impacts from recent administrative actions.
4. **Reverse DOI staff consolidation**, returning affected employees and funding to NPS pending a full, transparent review shared with relevant Congressional committees.