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Trump Administration considers Amazon deliveries and food trucks in national parks

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A new proposal from a now-disbanded committee under consideration by the Trump Administration could allow private firms to run aspects of the nation's campgrounds, and roll back discounts for seniors.

The controversial set of recommendations, issued in a memo by the Interior Department's Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee, casts campers as consumers with changing expectations and [outlines a new model to pump more revenue out of popular parks](#) and public lands across the U.S.

According to a spokesperson with the National Park Service, the committee was dissolved on Nov. 1 and action has yet to be taken on the recommendations.

“Overall capacity has not kept up with growth and changes in camping demands and the infrastructure that does exist, with few exceptions, fails to meet expectations of the contemporary camping market,” the [group wrote in a memo sent to Secretary of the Interior, David Bernhardt](#), after a meeting held in October. The committee proposes modernizing offerings — making the outdoors more appealing to cellphone-toting teens — and offering the private sector a bigger role.

Calling campgrounds an “underperforming asset,” the group advised the Department of Interior that expanding amenities like Wi-Fi and equipment rentals, furnished by the private sector, could improve and maximize park service sites.

The committee's proposal also put forward a model for new “high-quality contemporary campgrounds,” equipped with food trucks, mobile camp stores, Amazon deliveries, and other vaguely defined “innovative solutions in campground modernization and maintenance” along with a potential new set of baseline fees based on market pricing to pay for it all.

The plan was positioned as a way to secure future interest and access to the parks aimed at younger visitors. The proposal also recommends blackout dates for senior discounts, which apply to those 62 and over, during peak periods to ensure full-paying customers have a better chance of getting highly coveted spots in the most competitive campgrounds.

These changes, the committee said, could be implemented across department bureaus, including at lands operated by the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and on Native American lands, and the pilot program could be launched with a “Secretarial challenge” as soon as next month.

Private influence over public lands part of the DOI's plan

The Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee, comprised of outdoor recreation industry insiders, [was created by former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke in 2017](#) to advise the department on how to manage

public lands and private sector partnerships. Three of the members he appointed last year [were flagged by department officials with conflict of interest concerns](#), including current Vice Chair Derrick Crandall, a counselor for the National Park Hospitality Association, an organization representing U.S. national park concessionaires.

But the press release announcing the appointments explicitly says the advisers were selected specifically because of their industry-connections.

"The committee's collective experience as entrepreneurs and business leaders provide unique insight that is often lost in the federal government," Zinke said in a statement at the time. "As we rebuild our nation's infrastructure, we can continue the exponential growth of the American recreation sector, which supports millions of American jobs and bares a significant impact on our economy."

The Trump Administration also has emphasized the parks' potential to produce profit and work as a boon for the budget.

A [recent Economic Report released by the DOI on Oct. 15](#) highlighted the economic potential of the Administration's efforts for the fiscal year 2018. Championing both increases in energy acquisition on public lands and increases in revenue from park visitors, the report boasted that Interior activities resulted in \$315 billion in economic output and close to 2 million jobs.

Roughly \$58 billion came from the 486 million recorded recreational visits during 2018 — an increase of 13 million in just two years. Interest in seeing the country's iconic landscapes and awe-inspiring landmarks doesn't appear to be waning. The department also expressed hopes that next year's totals will be even bigger.

Change has already come to iconic parks including Yosemite

Many of the new ideas outlined in the proposal are in some form underway in popular parks like Yosemite. Despite being among the highest on the list for deferred maintenance needs — [roughly \\$646 million behind](#) — in recent years the park has been outfitted with new eateries, complete with digital ordering screens, and upgraded lodging options provided by concessionaires and private companies.

While this may be good for the bottom line, critics point to the cost. Enticing more people into crowded parks mean long lines on trails, overflowing bathrooms, and hours of slow traffic churn through winding mountain roads just to circle through full parking lots. Increased visitation also can lead to more accidents and threatened ecosystems, along with the continued degradation of the already crumbling infrastructure.

Park purists have been pushing back against the shift for years now, petitioning against new additions like a controversial Starbucks that opened in Yosemite last year, and protesting any plan that would put profit over preservation. Rather than privatizing to offer new amenities, critics would like to see plans that land fewer people in the parks.

Critics raise concerns over conservation and access

While the administration has yet to announce whether it will adopt the committee's plan, conservationists and equal-access advocates are already pushing back.

"We are concerned about many of the proposals, partly because it is coming from the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Council that is primarily composed of individuals representing the private sector," said Emily Douce, director of operations and park funding for the National Parks Conservancy Association. "Concessions are certainly an important role in providing enjoyment to national park

visitors but the devil is in the details,” she adds, specifically citing the potential for higher costs.

She also questions how the plan addresses resource protection, pointing to the government shutdown earlier this year when [the decision was made to keep National Parks open despite slim staffing](#). As a result, [delicate ecosystems were injured and parks were trashed](#).

Joel Pannell, associate director of the Sierra Club Outdoors, also has raised concerns about the proposal, especially how it will impact the ongoing work to diversify access.

“This is a thinly veiled effort to say this will help visitor experience,” he said, explaining that he’s spent years working to increase opportunities for low income and marginalized communities in the outdoors. The National Park Service Office of Relevancy, Inclusion and Diversity, he adds, hasn’t had a significant investment in years.

“This idea that if we privatize it, it will end up being a better user experience — I don’t see any evidence that that’s the case,” he said. “My primary concern is that this would increase barriers, particularly for low-income families, for seniors, and for other marginalized groups to enjoy the outdoors and our public lands. This is just further exploitation of our public lands for cronyism.”