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## **Trump Administration Seeks to Privatize National Parks**

by Suzanne Guldimann

**California groups sue to keep motorized electric bikes off non-motorized trails in Tahoe National Forest. This dramatic change in trail policy was made without public input.**

National Park Service campgrounds are the Trump Administration's latest target for privatization. A controversial Interior Department advisory committee created by disgraced former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has released plans to hand campgrounds over to concessionaires.

The Made in America Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee is comprised almost entirely of executives from the outdoor sports, recreation and hospitality industries.

Critics of the administration say it's a classic case of foxes minding the hen house, as many members of the committee already have lucrative contracts with the National Park Service. Members include Jim Rodgers, the former CEO of KOA—Kampgrounds for America, the largest private campground operator in the U.S.; Bruce Fears, the president of Aramark, which is the current concessionaire for Yosemite—a contract worth \$2 billion; and Jeremy Jacobs, Co-CEO of Delaware North, the previous Yosemite concessionaire who made headlines after claiming the names of the park's historic lodges—Ahwahnee and Wawona, Curry Village, and Yosemite Lodge—were the company's intellectual property. The Yosemite lodge name lawsuit cost the U.S. government \$3.84 million to settle, Aramark, which took over the contract for the lodges from Delaware North, paid \$8.16 million.

The committee members have hatched a plan to privatize campgrounds on public lands, adding amenities, not usually associated with the National Parks camping experience, and increasing fees.

The proposal suggests “new openness to innovative management and services in campgrounds ranging from mobile food service (food trucks) to mobile camp stores, specialized zones in campgrounds to maximize visitor satisfaction, innovative overnight operations (RentMyTent and small cabins, for example).”

The proposal calls for “categorical permissions” that would enable concessionaires to avoid meeting environmental impact review requirements for new development at the campgrounds, even in highly sensitive areas.

All of those improvements will come at a cost, one that will be passed directly to park users. The proposal calls for “Agreement on pricing, including a core campsite charge automatically adjusted for inflation or other index and market pricing of offered options, including connectivity and utilities.”

The proposal caters to younger and more affluent campers who can afford to rent equipment, and pay for perks like wifi and food service. It removes benefits for seniors, one of the major demographic groups currently using campgrounds. The plan proposes “blackout periods during peak season” for seniors, to prevent them from using the National Parks senior 50-percent discount. In a recent interview in the *Los Angeles Times*, Derrick Crandall, vice chairman of the committee, explained that the committee doesn't think seniors should “compete with a family with kids for a campsite” at high demand times like the Fourth of July weekend.

For many parks “peak season” is short because of weather conditions, and is arguably the only viable season for most campers, regardless of age.

The proposal was developed in part using surveys conducted by KOA, which found

“that younger and more diverse Americans find stays in campgrounds to be rewarding and desirable, although the research emphasizes that broad recreational participation drives camping participation, not just overnight stays in tents, RVs, and other offerings.”

## **TURNING NATIONAL PARKS INTO PROFIT CENTERS**

The response to the proposal is less than enthusiastic.

Joel Pannell, Associate Director of Sierra Club Outdoors for All, described the proposal as robbery.

“The Trump administration is trying to pass a fee hike under the radar, and pave the way for full privatization of our national parks,” Pannell wrote in a statement.

“Turning our national parks into profit centers for a select few vendors would rob our public lands of just what makes them special. Hiking fees and limiting discounts for seniors will shut out working families and elders on fixed incomes. We will not allow the embattled Trump administration to turn our national parks into playgrounds for the wealthy and privileged, or permit companies that financially support the Trump campaign to profit from privatization of our public lands.”

Phil Francis, chair of the Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks, described the plan as “ill-advised,” a “self-serving nod to business interests.”

Those business interests are busy making other changes. Brad Franklin, government relations manager at Yamaha Motor Corp. USA, is a producer of electric-powered bicycles and a member of the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee.

Earlier this year, the current Secretary of the Interior, Bernhardt, signed an order allowing electric bicycles on federal trails in national wildlife refuges and national parks. Bernhardt described the move as opening “opportunities to explore areas of the great outdoors that were previously unreachable.”

It also lines the pockets of corporations like Franklin’s, that now have previously unimaginable markets for their products.

On October 23, 2019, a coalition of California backcountry trail and forest groups filed a lawsuit challenging the U.S. Forest Service decision to allow motorized bikes to operate on non-motorized trails in the Tahoe National Forest.

Plaintiffs in the suit include the Gold Country Trails Council, Backcountry Horsemen of California, Back Country Horsemen of America, the Forest Issues Group, and The Wilderness Society. The groups are represented by the Western Environmental Law Center.

This lawsuit is expected to be the opening salvo in a prolonged battle. The fight to keep motorized vehicles off trails in sensitive areas is expected to be fought at parks throughout the country.

“Allowing motorized bicycles on non-motorized trails meant for hikers, backpackers, and equestrians poses risks and conflicts for the many visitors who enjoy that type of quiet recreation, a statement released by the Wilderness Society states. “It also undermines the trail building and maintenance time and money our volunteers have contributed in the Tahoe National Forest for decades.”

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area currently has only state-operated campgrounds, and no motorized vehicles are permitted on any trails in the network of state, local, and federal parkland that make up the National Recreation Area, but all changes to the park service have the potential to impact local park resources.

Both stories will be watched closely by local park advocates.