



The High Cost of a Park Giveaway: Trump's Plan to Offload National Parks

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President Donald Trump and his Republican allies in Congress have launched a series of attacks on America's public lands, from recklessly firing thousands of park workers to dismantling national monuments. Now, they're proposing their most disastrous plan to date: transferring America's cherished national parks to state control.

This drastic move would have profound effects on local communities by crippling state budgets and economies, destroying the workforce and infrastructure, and breaking longstanding commitments to the public.

Shifting Costs, Shrinking Economies

Transferring National Park Service units to state control would shift nearly \$23 billion in maintenance backlog costs to the states without the federal funding, infrastructure, or grants necessary to handle them. States would take on the responsibility for aging roads, buildings, and visitor facilities while losing eligibility for major federal support, such as the Great American Outdoors Act's Legacy Restoration Fund, which provides \$1.3 billion annually through 2025 to address repair needs in national parks. The Trump Administration is proposing to reauthorize this funding for another five years to improve their favorite parks, while shifting the maintenance burden of other parks to the states, without the money to maintain them. Making matters worse, the Fiscal Year 2026 Trump budget proposes diverting \$387 million from state recreation grants, meaning states would be left with more responsibility and even fewer resources to manage public lands.

The economic fallout won't just impact the parks; it will have a severe impact on gateway communities across America. These towns and cities just outside park boundaries rely on national parks as powerful economic engines, driving billions in tourism revenue and supporting tens of thousands of local jobs. If states take over, reduced visitation due to rebranding, degraded facilities, and lower service quality will hurt small businesses, slash job opportunities, and erode state tax revenue. In Arizona alone, visitors to National Park Service lands spent an estimated \$1.2 billion in 2023, supporting 17,300 jobs, \$684 million in labor income, and generating \$2.0 billion in economic output.

No One to Clean the Campsites or Fight the Fires



The National Park Service relies on more than 300,000 trained volunteers and 7,000–8,000 seasonal workers each year to staff campgrounds, greet visitors, pick up trash, and maintain trails. Volunteer teams provide more than 6.5 million hours of service, equivalent to over 3,100 full-time employees. The National Park Service has built this workforce through decades of experience, using platforms like Volunteer.gov, training systems like DOI Talent, and a dedicated team of professional volunteer managers. States simply don't have this infrastructure. Without it, they will face major gaps in staffing, service quality, and visitor experience, with no clear way to scale up quickly.

And when disaster strikes, whether it's a wildfire, hurricane, or flood, parks under state control will no longer have access to critical federal emergency support. That includes exclusion from the U.S. Wildland Fire Service, loss of access to the \$2.85 billion Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund, and elimination of preparedness and fuels management funding, key tools for preventing catastrophic fires. In 2024 alone, the National Park Service spent over \$90 million on wildfire preparedness and mitigation. States will be left to compete for limited resources, cover skyrocketing firefighting costs, and operate without the emergency supplemental funds that Congress routinely provides to federal parks after natural disasters.

Broken Promises to Veterans and Seniors

For decades, the federal government has honored veterans, active-duty military, and seniors with free and subsidized access to national parks as a symbol of appreciation and inclusion. This benefit would vanish under state management.

Each state runs its own pass system, many with annual fees, residency restrictions, limited park coverage, or blackout dates. These state passes are not interchangeable and do not honor the federal benefits that so many people have come to rely on. For example, Georgia charges \$50 per year for its pass, but it's not valid in all state recreational areas, while states like Michigan and New Jersey charge higher rates for non-residents. That means that 17 million veterans and active military who currently receive free national park access nationwide will lose that benefit. The same goes for the estimated 10 million seniors who paid for subsidized passes.

Beyond the financial loss, the rollback of these benefits is a clear breach of public trust. It introduces chaos and confusion into what is a simple, nationwide program, and it places the burden on seniors and veterans to navigate an inconsistent, fragmented system.



Conclusion

Transferring national parks to the states is not a cost-saving measure—it's a cost-shifting scheme that will devastate local economies, damage essential park infrastructure, and betray millions of Americans who count on access to these public lands. From volunteers to firefighters, from veterans to small business owners, the effects will be profound and far-reaching. What's at stake is more than budgets and maintenance, it's a shared national legacy built over generations. Handing that legacy over without the funding, systems, or guarantees to protect it is not a plan; it's a retreat from responsibility.