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Fiscal cliff threatens national parks, advocates say

By Sean Cockerham – 12/6/12

WASHINGTON -- Congress' looming failure to solve the fiscal cliff crisis leaves national parks facing large-scale cuts and the prospect of fewer visitors as tax increases leave Americans with less money to travel.

With serious doubts that the politicians will be able to reach a deal before the automatic spending cuts and tax increases go into effect at the end of the year, national park advocates and communities that depend on tourism revenue are growing increasingly worried.

They're joining defense companies, unions, health care providers, chambers of commerce and others in arguing to Congress that the across-the-board cuts would be a big blow to the nation's economy and quality of life.

"The impact will be very, very damaging for national parks," John Gardner of the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocacy group, said after a long day lobbying Congress last week.

The National Park Service, like other federal agencies, faces an automatic cut of 8.2 percent. That amounts to a nationwide \$218 million cut for the parks, according to members of Congress.

"That could mean some level of closure at virtually every national park in the system, including reductions in park hours or seasons, closures of campgrounds or visitor's centers, and even the outright closure of many parks in the next year. And it could eliminate as many as 9,000 rangers who serve the public, protect our parks, and keep the parks running – a devastating blow," according to a letter the National Parks Conservation Association is sending to members of Congress.

The National Park Service itself will not discuss the impact of the automatic cuts, known as sequestration. "We are not commenting on the impact of future budgets, or the possibility of a budget sequestration," said chief spokesman David Barna.

The National Parks Conservation Association argues that the park service is already spread thin, with its budget having been cut by 6 percent in the past two years.

But Chris Edwards, director of tax policy at the libertarian Cato Institute think tank in Washington, said the nation is grappling with a trillion-dollar deficit and it's reasonable to make these kinds of spending cuts.

"This goes to the general problem of the National Park Service as I see it; it's too large and sprawling," he said.

He suggested an attempt could be made to have non-profits take over some sites, and states could take responsibility for parks. "The main thing is to take the parks where most of the visitors are state residents and transfer those back to state governments," he said. "Keep the national jewels like Yellowstone."

Gardner, of the National Parks Conservation Association, argued that the size of the park service isn't the issue.

"The budget for the entire National Park Service amounts to one-fourteenth of 1 percent of the federal budget. The park system did not cause the deficit, and cutting the budget for the entire national park system would not make a difference in reducing it," he said.

People are getting worried in towns such as Cody, Wyo., a gateway for visitors to Yellowstone National Park.

"We're concerned with any circumstances that would reduce the experiences that visitors to Yellowstone and this area have," said Scott Balyo, executive director of Cody's chamber of commerce.

But he said there also is fear of the impact of the automatic tax increases that will come if there is no budget deal. An average family of four faces a tax increase of \$2,200, according to the White House.

“What we’re really concerned about would be a scenario where either people don’t travel or they do travel but they spend significantly less when they travel,” Balyo said. “That hurts our small businesses in terms of our restaurants, our shops, our attractions.”