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National parks brace for cuts but not closures

Claire Veyriras, California News Service

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Washington --

Visitors to California's national parks may notice more trash on the trails, longer lines at service booths and fewer rangers this summer as the pinch of the federal government's budget problems grows increasingly difficult to overlook.

Unlike the state's park system, which is scheduled to close 54 parks for lack of money this summer, the vast resources of the U.S. Park Service will prevent Yosemite or any of the state's national parks from shutting their gates for now.

Still, park enthusiasts warn that Washington's budget squeeze - after consecutive years of cuts - will be felt from Redwood's old growth forests to Death Valley's barren dunes.

"The cuts will significantly decrease the quality of the experience visitors have in the national parks," said Ron Sundergill, Pacific Region director of the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocate for the parks in Washington.

President [Obama's](#) proposed 2013 spending plan calls for no increase to National Park Service's \$2.75 billion annual budget, which it uses to oversee its 397 parks, 582 natural landmarks and 2,461 historic landmarks.

To meet growing demand and prior obligations, some programs will need to be cut. For instance, the newest budget strips \$3 million from the funds that pay for visitor centers, information booth, cleaning and safety.

"National parks already faced cuts during the last two years and are already underfunded so any additional cut makes the challenges even greater," said John Garder, the National Park Conservation Association's budget and appropriations legislative representative. "The impact on people's vacations will be substantial."

Obama's proposal is regarded as a best-case scenario. Most expect the park service to face much deeper cuts under the budget put forward by Republicans.

Park rangers have tried to confine the most noticeable cuts to the offseason and say that in many respects the wilderness experience will remain the same.

'Seasonal jobs'

"Visitors shouldn't notice the cuts too much because it will be touching seasonal jobs mainly," said Yosemite Superintendent Mike Tollefson.

But a National Park Service report speculates on what awaits the 220 million annual visitors to California's National Parks. Fewer seasonal rangers, fewer campgrounds and shorter hours at visitor centers are likely, according to the report. Longer lines at information booths, maintenance delays on trails, and traffic backups are expected.

"Visitors who enjoyed talking to the rangers might not be able anymore to enjoy this part of the visit at California National Parks" because rangers will take on additional tasks, according to the National Park Service's 2013 Green Report, an annual description of park spending.

Some consequences will be noticeable only in case of emergencies, especially in remote places such as Death Valley or Mojave National Preserve. Others represent losses over time, such as the preservation of endangered species or archaeological discoveries that may lack resources for proper storage.

The use of federal land to harvest illegal drugs is expected to increase as a result of the lack of rangers.

For better known parks such as Yosemite, private money might help compensate for the cuts. Some parks are trying to develop partnerships with organizations and hope to save money by conducting trainings on the Internet rather than sending staff off site.

The big parks, such as Yosemite, also raise a large portion of their money through visitation fees, most of which stay within the park.

No drastic changes

"Because 80 percent of the fees of Yosemite stay within the park, most of the park's revenue should not drastically change," Sundergill said.

Not everyone believes that the cuts are as serious as park supporters claim and insist that the nation cannot afford to continue spending so much on parks during tough economic times.

"Even with ... cuts they will still have more money than they had 10 years ago and 20 years ago and yet, we had the parks open back then," said Dan Mitchell, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank.

Areas closest to the parks benefit economically from the millions of visitors who spend money at hotels, restaurants and boutiques. In 2011, visitors to California's national parks spent \$1.3 billion, which supported 17,844 jobs, according to the Park Service.

If Congress does not agree to a debt-reduction package by the end of the year, discretionary spending programs will be subject to an additional 9 percent cut, and some people fear the Park Service could be subjected to a cut twice that large.

"In many different ways funding our national parks for the next two years is going to be very challenging," Garder said.

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