



## Questions for the Record

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**U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources - Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**  
**Hearing on “Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks.”**

**December 6, 2022**

### **Questions from Representative Steve Cohen:**

- 1. In your testimony, you suggested that the National Park Service end or relax the requirement that 55% of fee receipts be used on deferred maintenance. Do you have a recommendation on what you would consider to be a reasonable percentage of fee receipts be used on deferred maintenance?**

Revenues from visitors have become a significant funding source for some public land sites in recent years and are an important tool in addressing maintenance needs in national parks. National Park Service superintendents should have the ability to balance how these revenues are spent on deferred maintenance with ongoing maintenance to lower longterm liabilities.

Under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act national parks can charge recreation fees, and each individual site generally retains 80 percent of its collections to be spent at that site without further appropriation. Several national parks, including Zion, Joshua Tree, and the Grand Canyon, now generate as much revenue from visitors as they receive in discretionary funding from Congress.<sup>1</sup> Currently, the National Park Service directive is for parks to spend at least 55 percent of fee receipts on deferred maintenance. PERC recommends that the National Park Service sunset that rule and allow park superintendents the flexibility to decide how to allocate their fee revenues within approved expenditures designated by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.<sup>2</sup> While agency oversight to

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<sup>1</sup> See Tate Watkins, “[Enhancing the Public Lands Recreation Fee System](#),” PERC Policy Brief (November 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act limits the expenditure of fees at specific sites to six buckets that improve the visitor experience, including “repair, maintenance, and facility enhancement related directly to visitor enjoyment, visitor access, and health and safety.” See 16 U.S.C. § 6807 (2004).

hold park superintendents accountable to spending their fee dollars in a way that benefits the park and the visitor experience is crucial, individual park managers should be able to decide the optimum amount to invest in deferred maintenance. The main reason for this flexibility is that parks need flexibility to address routine maintenance projects that are essential to prevent growing the deferred maintenance backlog.

Local staff are best positioned to know what type of maintenance to prioritize. While an appropriate split for maintenance spending from fee revenues may vary a great deal from park to park, the overall split across the park system has been drastic. In 2018, for instance, the National Park Service spent approximately 23 times more recreation fee revenues on deferred maintenance (\$148.7 million) than routine maintenance (\$6.3 million).<sup>3</sup> The current agency directive also can perversely encourage superintendents to allow maintenance to become deferred because that is when funding becomes available, possibly increasing costs and muddling asset value assessments. Lastly, the directive is less relevant now that the Great American Outdoors Act provides dedicated funding for deferred maintenance.

**2. If the agency were to end its requirement, what effect do you believe additional deferred maintenance would have on the accessibility of the National Parks?**

The goal for Congress and the National Park Service should be to break the cycle of deferred maintenance and, subsequently, the negative impacts that deferred maintenance has on the visitor experience. To achieve that goal will require prioritizing routine maintenance needs before they become deferred.<sup>4</sup> For example, it is a better stewardship model to routinely service a wastewater system rather than deferring maintenance to a point where the system breaks and pollutes waterways.

It is, therefore, necessary to effectively utilize tools like the Legacy Restoration Fund created through the Great American Outdoors Act to address the current deferred maintenance backlog while also increasing the flexibility of fee revenues to account for routine maintenance needs so that today's maintenance needs do not become tomorrow's deferred maintenance problems.

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<sup>3</sup> "National Park Service: Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Justifications," p.RecFee-3.

<sup>4</sup> See Tate Watkins, "Fixing National Park Maintenance For the Long Haul," PERC Policy Brief (November 2020).