



U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Katie Porter, Chair Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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My name is Frank Dean. I am the President and CEO of the non-profit Yosemite Conservancy a charitable foundation for the park. I also currently serve as the Chair of the National Park Service Friends Alliance, a coalition of over 100 park partners that provide philanthropic support for national parks across the country. I join you today to testify in support of using day use reservation systems in overcrowded national parks.

Yosemite National Park experienced near record park visitation with 4.5 million visitors in 2019. There was traffic congestion and even gridlock in July and August of 2019 and the number of cars in Yosemite Valley exceeded the maximum cap established by a U.S. District Court settlement in 2014. At the request of the National Park Service, Yosemite Conservancy retained a transportation planner in 2019 to collect traffic data and identify possible solutions, including tracking how long day use visitors stayed in the park. This data and planning would prove to be crucial to reopening Yosemite during the global pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Yosemite to close in March 2020. National Park Service (NPS) managers Department of Interior officials in Washington, agreed to reopen Yosemite National Park in June 2020 at reduced service levels and required day use reservations for visitors not staying in park campgrounds or hotels. Day use reservations were required for 24 hours per day and were available via Recreation.gov website for a \$2 fee. The reservation was valid for a three-day period. The reservation requirement ended for the peak season in late September. With the nearly three-month spring closure and the launch of the reservations program, Yosemite served 2.2M visitors in 2020.

The Yosemite day use reservation program received significant news media coverage, but it was apparent that many people were unaware about the reservation requirement as many were turned away at the park entrance stations, including many Spanish speaking visitors.

In 2021, with the pandemic conditions still prevalent, Yosemite continued the day use reservation requirement from May through September. Some system refinements occurred to enable more visitors into the park as COVID cases declined. Yosemite Conservancy also assisted with funding a communications outreach to Spanish language radio, social media, and focused YouTube messaging to make people more aware about the Yosemite reservation system. This included a bilingual park ranger online video about the system. The Yosemite Conservancy also created an online video in Spanish to help people navigate the Recreation.gov reservation website. Yosemite received 3.29M visitors in 2021.

In 2022 given the lingering COVID conditions along with several large road repair projects that closed some areas of the park, Yosemite implemented a revised day use visitor management system for May through September. Rather than a 24-hour requirement, reservations were necessary only during peak hours between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m. This Timed Entry system provided access to the park for

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visitors who were unable to secure a day use reservation. The Spanish language outreach efforts continued to make people aware of the reservation program.

The Yosemite visitor experience the past three years has been much improved due to less traffic congestion, no vehicle parking issues and less waiting for visitor food services. The reservation system has also resulted in less people visiting the park which has affected the regional business community that serves park visitors. It is difficult to quantify these impacts as some areas of Yosemite have also been closed or impacted by wildfire closures and COVID related staffing shortages. In 2022 Yosemite Conservancy continued to experience a significant drop in retail sales in our in-park bookstores compared to 2019. Conversely, our guided naturalist walks have seen a near 100% revenue increase since the pandemic began.

The National Park Service recently announced that they will begin a public input process on December 9 to determine a long-term solution to Yosemite's visitor and traffic management issues. Given the pandemic has largely subsided, the park does not plan to have a day use reservation system in 2023 as they review various alternatives including a Timed Entry option. This will be a NEPA compliance process with the goal of a final decision by the 2024 summer season. Working with the park gateway communities and businesses will be essential to the success of any program going forward.

While crowding can be a subjective issue, particularly if one is comfortable in urban settings. Yosemite National Park does have a finite capacity for vehicles and people. Those legally determined capacities were regularly exceeded between busy summer weekends prior to the pandemic (2016-2019) which made the National Park Service vulnerable to possible litigation from conservation organizations. Those excessive congested traffic conditions were also not the standard expected in a national park. As Yosemite's non-profit partner, Yosemite Conservancy was nimbler and had the resources to support the National Park Service by quickly funding and implementing a day use reservation system and the necessary public information materials. The public facing tag line for the 2022 timed entry program was "Reserve Today, Preserve Tomorrow". Overall, the managed access programs have created an improved visitor experience at Yosemite and a much less costly solution than constructing additional parking and shuttle bus operations. In conclusion, I support the option of using day use reservation systems in national parks that experience overcrowded conditions.

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