



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON  
**NATURAL RESOURCES**  
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

**To:** House Committee on Natural Resources Republican Members  
**From:** House Natural Resources Committee Staff, Aniela Butler  
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**Date:** Tuesday, September 2, 2025  
**Subject:** Oversight Field Hearing titled “*The Great American Outdoors Act: Modernizing and Maintaining National Parks to Celebrate America’s 250th Birthday*”

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The House Committee on Natural Resources will hold an oversight field hearing titled “*The Great American Outdoors Act: Modernizing and Maintaining National Parks to Celebrate America’s 250th Birthday*” on **Friday, September 5, 2025, at 10:00 a.m. (MDT) at the Jenny Lake Visitor Center in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming.**

Member offices are requested to notify Sophia Varnasidis ([Sophia.Varnasidis@mail.house.gov](mailto:Sophia.Varnasidis@mail.house.gov)) by 4:30 p.m. (EDT) on Wednesday, September 3, 2025, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

## **I. KEY MESSAGES**

- The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which was signed into law in August 2020 by President Trump, is set to expire in September 2025.
- Ahead of our nation’s 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, Congress has a unique opportunity to reauthorize and reform this law to ensure that our national parks and public lands are modernized and maintained for generations to come.
- Reauthorizing the GAOA will not just benefit national parks but will also create new jobs and sustain billions of dollars in spending within rural and gateway communities that rely on park-driven tourism.
- Instead of focusing narrowly on maintenance, the next iteration of the GAOA should concentrate on projects that modernize our parks, enhance public access, improve infrastructure, and create new outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Along with energy production, harnessing new funding sources, such as foreign visitor fees, and enhanced public-private partnerships can create more sustainable revenue for our national parks, while keeping these iconic places affordable for Americans.
- In light of the \$10 billion increase in the National Park Service (NPS)’s deferred maintenance backlog over the past several years, Congress must enact reforms to ensure transparency, increase accountability, and wisely steward taxpayer dollars.

## II. WITNESSES

- **Mr. Chip Jenkins**, Superintendent, Grand Teton National Park, Moose, WY
- **Ms. Leslie Mattson**, President, Grand Teton National Park Foundation, Wilson, WY
- **Ms. Julie Calder**, Board Chair, Jackson Hole Travel and Tourism Board, Wilson, WY
- **Mr. Taylor Phillips**, Founder and Owner, Jackson Hole EcoTour Adventures, Jackson, WY
- **Ms. Kristen Brengel**, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs, National Parks Conservation Association, Washington, D.C. [*Minority Witness*]

## III. BACKGROUND

### *Investing in our National Parks in Celebration of the Nation's 250<sup>th</sup> Birthday*



Grand Teton National Park. **Source:** Isaac Martin, 2021.

NPS manages 433 individual units in each of the 50 states and every U.S. territory, encompassing a total of 85 million acres across the National Park System (System).<sup>1</sup> These sites conserve the richness of America's landscapes, from Alaska's icy fjords and Wyoming's roaring geysers to California's

towering giant sequoias, the misty peaks of Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, and Utah's red rock canyons. NPS units also protect unique historical sites, including the hallowed and iconic places foundational to the creation of our country 250 years ago, such as Saratoga Battlefield in New York, Yorktown Battlefield in Virginia, Independence Hall in Pennsylvania, and Minute Man National Historical Park in Massachusetts. Together, our national parks provide Americans with opportunities to explore themes of liberty, freedom, and resilience in places that connect past and present. They also offer an abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities, including hiking, biking, rock climbing, camping, whitewater rafting, canoeing, horseback riding, and fishing, among many more. These activities make our national parks attractive and affordable destinations for families across the country to visit, creating memories that will last and be passed down for generations.

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<sup>1</sup> National Park Service, "National Park System," <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/national-park-system.htm>.

Investing in the modernization and maintenance of national parks benefits not only the parks themselves but also the nearby gateway communities. In 2023, the most recent year for which data is available, 325.5 million people visited national parks, spending “an estimated \$26.4 billion in local gateway regions.”<sup>2</sup> This spending supported 415,400 jobs and generated \$55.6 billion in economic output.<sup>3</sup> Local hotels and restaurants, which are often small businesses, feel the greatest effect of this spending, with \$9.9 billion and \$5.2 billion in economic output contributed to the lodging and restaurant sectors, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, recreation on public lands plays a crucial role in supporting the \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy.<sup>5</sup> As more Americans visit our national parks and the outdoor recreation economy continues to grow, “so does the need for continued investment in public lands and infrastructure.”<sup>6</sup>



The Jenny Lake Visitor's Center at Grand Teton National Park, the location of the field hearing.

**Source:** Grand Teton National Park Foundation, no date.

National parks have been referred to as “America’s Best Idea,” and one of the true crown jewels of the System is Grand Teton National Park (GTNP), the location of the field hearing.<sup>7</sup> Established in 1929 by President Coolidge and expanded to its current boundaries in 1950 by President Truman, GTNP boasts sweeping views of the Teton range and a cultural history dating back 11,000 years.<sup>8</sup> Covering 310,000 acres in the heart of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the park contains a range of alpine, forest, wetland, and sagebrush habitats that sustain abundant

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<sup>2</sup> National Park Service, “2023 National Park Visitor Spending Effects,” August 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

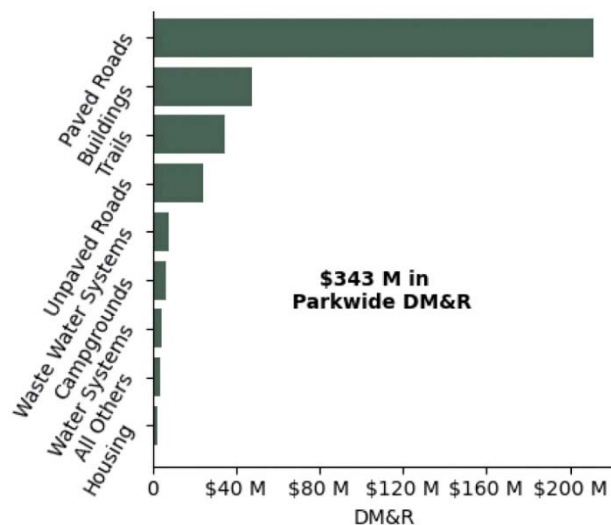
<sup>5</sup> Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, “New Data Shows Outdoor Recreation is a \$1.2 Trillion Economic Engine, Supporting 5 Million American Jobs,” November 20, 2024, <https://recreationroundtable.org/news/new-data-shows-outdoor-recreation-is-a-1-2-trillion-economic-engine-supporting-5-million-american-jobs/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> “National Parks: America’s Best Idea,” PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-national-parks/>.

<sup>8</sup> National Park Service, “Creation of Grand Teton National Park,” January 2000, <https://www.nps.gov/grte/playourvisit/upload/creation.pdf>. [https://www.discovergrandteton.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/student\\_guide\\_09\\_web.pdf](https://www.discovergrandteton.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/student_guide_09_web.pdf).





Deferred Maintenance and Repairs in GTNP.

Source: NPS, no date.

wildlife populations of bison, grizzly and black bears, moose, elk, and bald eagles.<sup>9</sup> In 2024, more than 3.6 million people visited GTNP, spending an estimated \$1.74 billion in Teton County, Wyoming.<sup>10</sup> Tourism in Teton County that year supported approximately 8,480 jobs and generated \$103.8 million in sales tax revenue, funding critical public services across the state.<sup>11</sup>

In fiscal year (FY) 2024, GTNP had an estimated \$343 million in deferred maintenance and repairs, plus \$14 million of annual routine maintenance needs, while the park’s infrastructure assets included 414 miles of trails, 33 campgrounds, and 151 miles of paved roads.<sup>12</sup>

Recognizing the profound benefits that our national parks and public lands provide to all Americans, Congress passed the GAOA, with President Trump signing it into law on August 4, 2020.<sup>13</sup> The GAOA established a new, mandatory fund known as the “National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund” (LRF) to address the deferred maintenance needs of NPS and four other land management agencies.<sup>14</sup> Before the GAOA’s enactment, NPS’s deferred maintenance backlog had been steadily rising through the 2010s, reaching \$12.7 billion by the end of FY 2019.<sup>15</sup> Under the GAOA, the LRF received \$1.9 billion annually from FY 2021 to FY 2025 (\$9.5 billion total).<sup>16</sup> Of this amount, NPS received \$1.33 billion, or 70 percent of overall funds, annually.<sup>17</sup>

To date, GTNP has received \$77.8 million in GAOA funding for four projects addressing maintenance on Moose-Wilson Road, rehabilitating cabins, replacing wastewater systems, and addressing safety issues at various buildings.<sup>18</sup> Using a combination of GAOA funds, recreation fees, and general appropriations funding, GTNP also has 13 planned infrastructure projects

<sup>9</sup> National Park Service, Grand Teton National Park, “Wildlife”, <https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/nature/animals.htm>. National Park Service, Grand Teton National Park, “Mammals,” <https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/nature/mammals.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Jasmine Hall, “Visitors spent \$1.74 billion in Teton County in 2024,” Mary 14, 2025, Jackson Hole News and Guide, [https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/business/visitors-spent-1-74-billion-in-teton-county-in-2024/article\\_14122917-745d-4b47-9580-6436ad1c8757.html](https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/business/visitors-spent-1-74-billion-in-teton-county-in-2024/article_14122917-745d-4b47-9580-6436ad1c8757.html).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> NPS, “Infrastructure Fact Sheet: Grand Teton National Park,” <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/Grand-Teton-National-Park-Deferred-Maintenance-and-Repairs-Factsheet.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Pub. L. No. 116-152, <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ152/PLAW-116publ152.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Congressional Research Service, “The Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152)” Carol Hardy Vincent, Laura B. Comay, Bill Heniff Jr., December 15, 2022, <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF11636?source=searchId>.

<sup>15</sup> Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, “It’s Time for Congress to Address the Maintenance Backlog on America’s Public Lands and Waterways”, [https://recreationroundtable.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ORR\\_DeferredMaintenance\\_Onesheet\\_03.pdf](https://recreationroundtable.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ORR_DeferredMaintenance_Onesheet_03.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> Spreadsheet including GTNP projects can be downloaded here: <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa-project-data>.

totaling \$33.1 million, which would enhance visitor experience by improving cabins and several trails.<sup>19</sup>

### **Reauthorizing and Reforming the GAOA**

The authorization for GAOA is currently set to expire on September 30, 2025.<sup>20</sup> Ahead of the nation's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, reauthorizing the GAOA can help ensure that crumbling trails are repaired, dilapidated visitor centers and campgrounds are modernized, and recreation sites remain open and accessible. Failing to modernize and maintain our parks threatens to jeopardize NPS resources, diminish visitor enjoyment, exacerbate park overcrowding, and create public safety hazards. Along with the multitude of economic benefits generated by park visitation, GAOA investments have also independently supported “an estimated 18,851 jobs” and contributed “\$2 billion to the nation’s gross domestic product.”<sup>21</sup>



GAOA funds were used to address critical roof repairs at GTNP that threatened public safety. **Source:** GTNP, 2025.

GAOA funds were used to address critical roof repairs at GTNP that threatened public safety. **Source:** GTNP, 2025.

However, in light of the Biden administration’s egregious mismanagement of GAOA funding, vital reforms are needed to ensure that the full benefits of this law are realized.

### ***Appropriately Distributing Funds Across NPS to Improve and Modernize Visitor Experiences***

There are significant concerns that GAOA funds were not appropriately distributed between transportation and non-transportation projects, did not adequately address needs at smaller parks, and disproportionately prioritized urban cities over rural crown jewels of the System. The GAOA largely focused on expensive projects designed to repair roads or wastewater treatment systems, rather than recreational assets. For example, of the ten largest projects funded under the GAOA from FY 2021-2024, only two projects—conspicuously located in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, California—were unrelated to transportation or replacing wastewater systems.<sup>22</sup> The second-largest project ever funded under the GAOA for NPS was \$207.8 million for the George Washington Memorial Parkway rehabilitation in Washington, D.C. Over the past four years of NPS funding, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia collectively received \$839.3 million, or

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Department of the Interior, “Great American Outdoors Act,” <https://www.doi.gov/priorities/great-american-outdoors-act>.

<sup>22</sup> Spreadsheet of GAOA projects, can be downloaded here: <https://www.doi.gov/gaoa-project-data>.

15 percent of the overall funding.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, former Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s district in San Francisco alone received \$214,878,097 from GAOA.<sup>24</sup> For context, this one Congressional district received more NPS GAOA funding than 44 entire states over the FY 2021-2024 period.<sup>25</sup> These figures do not include an additional \$200 million for deferred maintenance from the so-called “Inflation Reduction Act” for Presidio Park. In contrast, the State of Utah, home to the “Mighty Five” iconic national parks, received only \$65.5 million in GAOA funding, less than one-third of the funding sent to San Francisco.<sup>26</sup>

The GAOA was initially designed to address the growing deferred maintenance backlogs at our federal land management agencies. Currently, the largest of these is NPS’s nearly \$23 billion deferred maintenance backlog.<sup>27</sup> While well-intentioned, this narrow definition focused resources on projects like resurfacing commuter parkways around D.C. and replacing HVAC units in administrative buildings, rather than on projects that modernize and improve visitor experiences, like installing broadband connectivity at campgrounds.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, excessive funding was diverted from on-the-ground projects to overhead. In FY 2023, for example, 35 percent of funds were spent on planning and compliance, administrative expenses, and a contingency fund.<sup>29</sup> The outsized focus on deferred maintenance has also created perverse incentives for “managers to allow maintenance to become deferred” so they can access funding.<sup>30</sup> Unlike routine maintenance, deferred maintenance constitutes “maintenance and repairs that were not performed when they should have been or were scheduled to be and which are put off or delayed for a future period.”<sup>31</sup> Failing to prioritize cyclical maintenance can “shorten the life and value of an asset,” leading to “significantly higher maintenance and repair costs.”<sup>32</sup>

To address these concerns, GAOA reforms could include guardrails to ensure a better distribution of funding across the System. Furthermore, the GAOA could be amended to broaden the scope of the LRF to encompass cyclical maintenance and infrastructure modernization, thereby removing incentives to let assets deteriorate. This would also give park superintendents the flexibility to improve infrastructure and enhance the visitor experience, rather than simply repairing it to a baseline standard of use. Focusing GAOA funds on projects that will enhance public access or create new recreation opportunities would also inherently direct funds to smaller

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<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> Project data, including Congressional district, can be found here: <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-05/fy21-fy25-nps-gaoa-lrf-pdss-508.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> The states are: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

<sup>26</sup> Project data, including Congressional district, can be found here: <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-05/fy21-fy25-nps-gaoa-lrf-pdss-508.pdf>. Utah National Parks. Utah.com, <https://www.utah.com/destinations/national-parks/>.

<sup>27</sup> National Park Service, “Infrastructure,” <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/deferred-maintenance.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> “North Parkway Rehabilitation.” U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, October 18, 2024, [www.nps.gov/gwmp/learn/management/north-parkway-rehabilitation.htm](http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/learn/management/north-parkway-rehabilitation.htm).

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> Tate Watkins, “Fixing National Park Maintenance For the Long Haul,” Property and Environment Research Center, November 18, 2020, <https://www.perc.org/2020/11/18/fixing-national-park-maintenance-for-the-long-haul/>.

<sup>31</sup> Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board, “Deferred Maintenance and Repairs,” April 25, 2012, [http://files.fasab.gov/pdffiles/original\\_sffas\\_42.pdf](http://files.fasab.gov/pdffiles/original_sffas_42.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Government Accountability Office, “Agencies’ Processes Generally Follow Leading Practices in Selecting Projects to Maintenance Public Assets but Face Challenges,” January 8, 2024, GAO-24-106495.

projects that target both large and small parks in rural areas. For example, Yosemite National Park spent \$20 million in GAOA funds updating 329 sites in the Tuolumne Meadows Campground, which sees 150,000 campers every year.<sup>33</sup> At the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve in Alaska, NPS utilized its successful Maintenance Action Teams to restore 13 cabins as a “base of operations for scientists, wildland firefighters and emergency responders, and for educational camps” for just over \$1 million.<sup>34</sup> Incentivizing more projects like these would realign the GAOA to fulfill Congress’s original intent of improving our parks for current and future generations.

### *Ensuring Sustainable Funding Sources and Leveraging Public-Private Partnerships*

Under the GAOA, funds for the deferred maintenance backlog were derived from 50 percent of the unobligated or “miscellaneous” revenues deposited into the U.S. Treasury from all forms of energy development (oil, gas, coal, and alternative or renewable energy) on federal lands and waters, up to \$1.9 billion a year for five years (\$9.5 billion total).<sup>35</sup> In FY 2024, American energy production on federal lands and waters generated \$15.2 billion in revenue.<sup>36</sup> Oil and gas accounted for the overwhelming share of this revenue, generating \$13 billion, or 86 percent, of the overall revenue.<sup>37</sup> This means that federal oil and gas production generated enough revenue in one year to sustain the LRF for nearly seven additional years. In contrast, renewable energy generated only \$600 million in FY 2023, enough to sustain the LRF for roughly four months.<sup>38</sup> On July 4, 2025, President Trump signed the One Big Beautiful Bill into law, which the Congressional Budget Office projects will generate an additional \$16 billion in energy revenues over baseline expectations during the next decade.<sup>39</sup> This legislation helps ensure the longevity of conservation programs like GAOA, generating enough additional revenue alone to sustain LRF funding through FY 2033.

On July 3, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order (EO) 14314, “Making America Beautiful Again by Improving our National Parks.”<sup>40</sup> This EO directed the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to increase foreign visitor fees, along with “improving affordability for United States residents, and expanding opportunities to enjoy America’s splendid national

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<sup>33</sup> National Park Service, “Tuolumne Meadows Campground in Yosemite National Park To Be Repaired and Improved through GAOA Funding,” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/gaoa-tuolumne-meadows-campground.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> “Recreation Maintenance Action Teams,” National Park Service, [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/NPS-MAT-Recreation-Slick-Sheet\\_June2025.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/NPS-MAT-Recreation-Slick-Sheet_June2025.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> There is no such thing as unobligated energy receipts. Energy revenues deposited into the Treasury before the passage of the GAOA were used to pay other obligations of the U.S. government. Therefore, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) “scored” the bill as increasing the deficit by \$9.54 billion (<https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2020-07/HR1957directspending.pdf>). The 5 years referenced are FY 2021-FY 2025.

<sup>36</sup> “Revenue Data,” Office of Natural Resources Revenue, <https://revenuedata.doi.gov/explore/?dataType=Revenue&location=NF%2CNA&mapLevel=State&offshoreRegions=false&period=Fiscal+Year&year=2024>.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> This is most recent year for which data is available. Department of the Interior, “Interior Department Announces \$18.24 Billion in Fiscal Year 2023 Energy Revenue,” November 9, 2023, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-announces-1824-billion-fiscal-year-2023-energy-revenue#>.

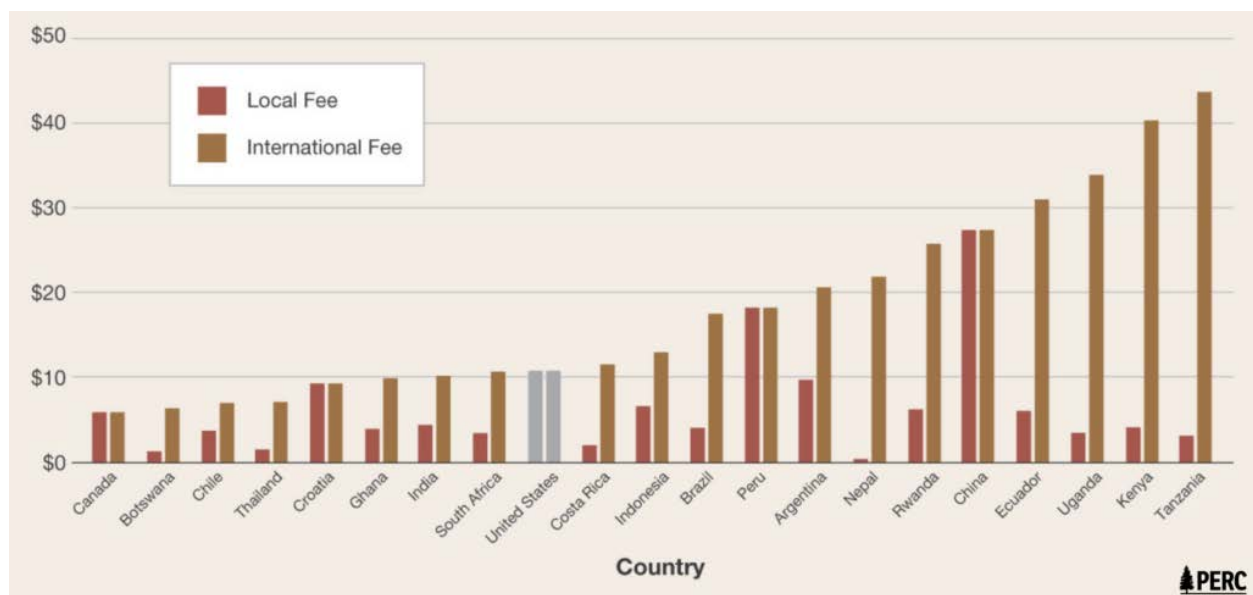
<sup>39</sup> “Estimated Budgetary Effects of Public Law 119-21, to Provide for Reconciliation Pursuant to Title II of H. Con. Res. 14, Relative to CBO’s January 2025 Baseline,” Congressional Budget Office, July 21, 2025, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61570>.

<sup>40</sup> EO 14314, “Making America Beautiful Again by Improving our National Parks,” The Executive Office of the President, July 3, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/07/09/2025-12775/making-america-beautiful-again-by-improving-our-national-parks>.



treasures.”<sup>41</sup> EO 14314 also directed the Secretary to fully implement the GAOA and “invest in the infrastructure of national parks” to increase visitor capacity and “allow more Americans to visit national parks.”<sup>42</sup> These proposals were also included in the Department of the Interior’s (DOI’s) FY 2026 budget request.<sup>43</sup> Effectively implementing this proposal will require careful calibration of the fee amount and structure, refining and expanding technologies to streamline entry gate operations, and ensuring protocols are in place so that U.S. citizens are never mistakenly charged a foreign visitor fee.

Currently, the United States does not differentiate between domestic and foreign visitors in its park fee structure, whereas numerous other nations offer discounts to their own citizens by charging higher fees to foreign visitors.<sup>44</sup> For example, Americans visiting Ecuador can expect to pay a \$200 fee to enter Galapagos National Park, while local residents pay just \$30.<sup>45</sup> In fact, many countries charge their citizens zero or nominal fees to enter their parks or other iconic sites. In Cambodia, the Angkor Archeological Park, which includes the famous Temple of Angkor Wat, is free for residents, while daily admission costs \$37 for non-residents.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the Taj Mahal in India costs \$0.57 for residents and \$12.60 for international visitors, a 2,034 percent difference.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, tourists from foreign nations can enter Grand Teton National Park for \$35, paying the same price as U.S. citizens.<sup>48</sup>



Local versus foreign visitor fees to national parks across select countries. The United States is one of only a few countries that does not currently charge an international visitor fee. **Source:** PERC, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> “Fiscal Year 2026 The Interior Budget in Brief,” Department of the Interior, May 2025, [https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-06/fy26bibentire-book508060125\\_0.pdf](https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-06/fy26bibentire-book508060125_0.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Tate Watkins, “How Overseas Visitors Can Help Steward Our National Parks,” Property and Environment Research Center, December 21, 2023, <https://www.perc.org/2023/12/21/how-international-visitors-can-help-steward-our-national-parks/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Entrance Fee to the Galapagos National Park,” <https://www.gobiernogalapagos.gob.ec/galapagos-fee/>.

<sup>46</sup> “Hours & Admission,” <https://www.siemreap.net/guides/angkor/hours-admission/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Ticketing,” <https://www.tajmahal.gov.in/ticketing.aspx>.

<sup>48</sup> This reflects the cost of a seven-day vehicle pass, the most affordable pass option. National Park Service, “Fees and Passes, Grand Teton National Park,” [https://www.nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/fees.htm#spci\\_E4DB730D-9E86-3F75-F5EB207911188B2A](https://www.nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/fees.htm#spci_E4DB730D-9E86-3F75-F5EB207911188B2A).



A modest surcharge on international visitors could generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue with little effect on visitation. According to research from the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), approximately 14 million international visitors visit the United States each year, a figure expected to increase as the Country celebrates its 250<sup>th</sup> birthday and hosts major events, such as the Summer 2028 Olympic Games.<sup>49</sup> PERC’s study found that foreign visitors spend an average of \$4,484 when traveling to the U.S., making the average national park entrance fee (\$35) one of the cheapest parts of their vacation.<sup>50</sup> Further, PERC’s research estimated that doubling park entrance fees for foreign visitors would decrease visitation by less than one percent.<sup>51</sup> By increasing fees on these travelers by a mere \$25 or \$40, national parks could raise an additional \$330 million or \$538 million, respectively, in annual revenue.



Trail repairs at Jenny Lake before, during, and after construction.

**Source:** Grand Teton National Park Foundation, 2015.

Finally, GAOA could better leverage public-private partnerships to maximize the impact of taxpayer dollars. At GTNP, the Grand Teton National Park Foundation has

successfully leveraged park funding into additional philanthropic support, funding important projects such as the Jenny Lake Renewal Project.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in Arkansas’s Hot Springs National Park, an initial \$18 million investment in historic bathhouses facilitated an unprecedented leasing structure that has revitalized Bathhouse Row with new businesses and created nearly \$100 million in economic growth for the local community.<sup>53</sup> The EXPLORE Act provided new authorities that could facilitate these increased partnerships, such as expanded Good Neighbor Authority for recreation, which would allow non-federal partners to build new trails, picnic areas, or recreation access points on federal lands.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Tate Watkins, “How Overseas Visitors Can Help Steward Our National Parks,” Property and Environment Research Center, December 21, 2023, <https://www.perc.org/2023/12/21/how-international-visitors-can-help-steward-our-national-parks/>.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> “Jenny Lake Renewal Project Completed in Grand Teton,” Grand Teton National Park Foundation, <https://www.gtnpf.org/jenny-lake-renewal-project-completed-in-grand-teton/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Historic Leasing in National Parks,” National Trust for Historic Preservation,

<https://cdn.savingplaces.org/2023/05/17/14/52/29/111/Historic%20Leasing%20Case%20Studies.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> 16 U.S.C. 8571.

## *Transparency and Accountability*

Since the GAOA's passage, NPS's deferred maintenance backlog increased by an astounding \$10.3 billion.<sup>55</sup> A confluence of factors contributed to this, including the "aging of NPS assets, availability of funding for maintenance activities, acquisition of new assets, agency management of the backlog, completion of individual projects, changes in construction and related costs, and alterations in the methods used to estimate deferred maintenance."<sup>56</sup> While all five agencies that receive GAOA funding have seen increases in deferred maintenance, no agency's backlog has reached the scale of NPS's. After receiving four full years of GAOA funding totaling \$5.32 billion, NPS's backlog rose from \$12.7 billion at the end of FY 2019 to \$22.98 billion at the end of FY 2024.<sup>57</sup> This raises serious concerns about the reliability of NPS's data and the agency's transparency in calculating its deferred maintenance numbers.

Both the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and DOI's Office of Inspector General (OIG) issued reports highlighting issues with NPS's deferred maintenance data and transparency.<sup>58</sup> The OIG found serious discrepancies with deferred maintenance reporting and tracking that "compromise the NPS' ability to achieve its mission, manage its deferred maintenance, and fulfill its responsibility to ensure the safety of visitors and NPS staff."<sup>59</sup> The OIG found NPS's data generally "inaccurate and unreliable."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the report found that NPS inappropriately inflated its backlog by 35 percent without sufficient justification and did not consistently monitor and complete critical Health, Life, and Safety work orders.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, GAO found that DOI did not implement a standardized definition for deferred maintenance across all agencies until 2023, leading to potential inconsistencies and erroneous reports.<sup>62</sup>

This created widespread confusion about the factors driving such a significant increase in the backlog. For example, in 2022, NPS attributed \$8.8 billion of the increase from FY 2020-FY 2021 to "the addition of design, compliance, and construction management costs to estimates."<sup>63</sup> However, the backlog increased by \$7.43 billion between these years, leaving an unexplained gap of \$1.4 billion. This is also the year NPS applied a blanket 35 percent markup to its estimates, which alone increased the backlog by \$3.7 billion.<sup>64</sup> While a methodology change could account for a portion of this increase, it does not fully explain its entirety.

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<sup>55</sup> DOI Deferred Maintenance and Repairs by Asset Class As Reported in the Agency Financial Report, FY 2020 and FY 2021, [https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/doi\\_fy2021\\_deferred\\_maintenance\\_backlog\\_as\\_reported\\_in\\_the\\_afr\\_and\\_comparison\\_to\\_fy2020.pdf](https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/doi_fy2021_deferred_maintenance_backlog_as_reported_in_the_afr_and_comparison_to_fy2020.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Laura B. Comay, "National Park Service Deferred Maintenance: Overview and Issues," Congressional Research Service, July 25, 2024, R48136.

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/deferred-maintenance.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* "The National Park Service Faces Challenges in Managing Its Deferred Maintenance," Report No.: 2020-CR-066, Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General, September 2023, [https://www.doiig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/Final%20Evaluation%20Report\\_NPS%20Deferred%20Maintenance\\_Public.pdf](https://www.doiig.gov/sites/default/files/2021-migration/Final%20Evaluation%20Report_NPS%20Deferred%20Maintenance_Public.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> *Id.* Pg. 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* Pg. 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.* Pg. 18 and Pg. 25.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.* Pg. 13.

<sup>63</sup> "Federal Real Property: Agencies Attribute Substantial Increases in Reported Deferred Maintenance to Multiple Factors," Government Accountability Office, October 28, 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-106124.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

The most significant increase in the backlog, from \$14.37 billion in FY 2020 to \$21.8 billion in FY 2021, occurred the year *before* the new methodology was put into place. Between FY 2021 and FY 2022, the interval in which the agency implemented its methodology change, the backlog increased by only \$500 million.

The GAOA cannot be successfully reauthorized without addressing its obvious shortfalls. Agencies must adopt a consistent and standardized methodology that aligns with industry standards for calculating deferred maintenance. Previously, the agency included only construction costs in its estimates of deferred maintenance.<sup>65</sup> Starting in FY 2019, however, cost estimates were expanded to “[align] with contemporary industry standards” and include design, compliance, and construction and project management.<sup>66</sup> NPS also transitioned away from calculating deferred maintenance by “using the summation of work order costs,” which were inherently inconsistent and unreliable, to a more comprehensive system.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, codifying this methodology alone will not address “the ongoing risk that the assessments may not be updated as deferred maintenance work is completed.”<sup>68</sup> The NPS must effectively monitor and track deferred maintenance at all levels of the agency to reduce its backlog.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> National Park Service, “Infrastructure”, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/faqs.htm>.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> *Id.* This system consists of: (1) Parametric condition assessments for industry standard assets; (2) Federal Highways Administration assessments for transportation infrastructure; and (3) work orders for concessions-occupied assets.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* Pgs. 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* Pg. 14.