



September 8, 2025

National Park Service: Fee Increases for International Visitors

Congress has debated various measures to generate additional funds for the National Park System in light of a large backlog of deferred maintenance on system lands. One option under discussion has been to raise park entrance fees for international visitors, in line with policies of some other nations that assess different national park fees for domestic versus international visitors. On July 3, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14314, “Making America Beautiful Again by Improving Our National Parks.” The order directed the Secretary of the Interior to increase specified National Park Service (NPS) fees for “nonresidents” of the United States and also directed a price increase for multiagency passes sold to nonresidents. Congress may conduct oversight of the E.O.’s implementation. Also, Congress could consider bills introduced in the 119th Congress related to international visitors to national parks and federal recreational lands.

President Trump’s Executive Order

E.O. 14314 directs the Secretary of the Interior to “appropriately” increase NPS “entrance fees and recreation pass fees for nonresidents,” in order to “increase revenue and improve the recreational experience at national parks.” The E.O. also directs the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture, working together, to take steps to increase the price nonresidents pay for the America the Beautiful—National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass (ATB Pass), which provides access to recreational lands of multiple federal agencies, including NPS.

The E.O. directs that the revenues generated from these changes are to be used to improve infrastructure and enhance enjoyment or access, consistent with provisions on fee use (16 U.S.C. §6807) in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA). FLREA authorizes NPS and some other agencies to charge entrance and/or recreation fees on federal recreational lands and to set fee levels according to specified criteria. FLREA also authorizes the establishment and sale of the ATB Pass. The act directs the use of fee and pass revenues for certain purposes that aim to benefit visitors, such as facility repair and maintenance, interpretation, and visitor services. Under FLREA, an individual park unit or other federal site generally retains at least 80% of revenues generated at that site from fees and pass sales.

Among its additional provisions, the E.O. directs the Secretary of the Interior to work with the Secretary of State “to encourage international tourism to America’s national parks and outdoor recreation areas,” focusing especially on “underutilized” areas. It further directs a review of the NPS maintenance backlog and actions to “fully implement” infrastructure investments, including those funded through the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration

Fund (LRF; 54 U.S.C. Chapter 2004). Also, the Secretary of the Interior must work to improve services and affordability for U.S. residents visiting national parks, and ensure that NPS gives U.S. residents “preferential treatment” (consistent with applicable law) for permits, lotteries, and other types of recreational access.

Related 119th Congress Legislation

In the 119th Congress, S. 2308 and H.R. 4604 would amend FLREA to authorize entrance fee surcharges for “international visitors” to National Park System units. The surcharges could be established at individual park units in an amount that “maximizes revenue ... while retaining international visitation.” Revenues from the surcharges would be retained at the park unit and could be used for “maintenance, visitor services, staffing, and related needs.” The bills also would direct the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to establish a surcharge for the sale of multiagency ATB passes to international visitors, with proceeds to be deposited into the LRF.

Revenue Potential from Fee Surcharges

In general, potential revenue from fee surcharges for international visitors to the National Park System has been challenging to estimate, because NPS has not collected systematic data on the numbers of international visitors to park units. The International Trade Administration (ITA) surveyed a sample of the 48.3 million international air travelers visiting the United States in 2024, and found that 33% of those surveyed visited “national parks and monuments.” (It could be unclear whether all these visits were to the National Park System, since some national monuments are managed by federal agencies other than NPS.) For comparison, total park system visits in 2024 were estimated at 331.9 million. Yellowstone National Park conducted summer visitor use surveys in 2016, 2018, and 2024, which found that international visitors to that park constituted 17% of total summer visitors in 2016, 30% in 2018, and 15% in 2024. The percentage of visitors coming from foreign countries could be higher at some parks than others across the system—among other reasons, because some parks may be especially well-known internationally.

Revenue from a fee surcharge also would depend on the amount of the surcharge. E.O. 14314 directs that the surcharge amounts should be “appropriate,” and S. 2308 and H.R. 4604 would require a surcharge amount that “maximizes revenue ... while retaining international visitation.” A higher surcharge could result in more revenue, although questions could arise about the extent to which fee increases might discourage international visitation to national park units and thus reduce potential revenue. Some researchers have found price elasticity of demand for national parks to be relatively low, meaning

that “considerable increases in entry fees would be needed to reduce visitor numbers substantially” (*Eco-Environment & Health*, June 2025). One recent U.S. study, employing a research-based assumption that an NPS international visitor surcharge of anywhere from \$16 to \$40 over base fees would decrease international visitation by 3%, estimated such surcharges would substantially increase fee revenues (Property and Environment Research Center, 2023).

Considerations for Congress

NPS and park stakeholders have noted potential opportunities and challenges related to raising park fees for international visitors. Some discussion has centered on how the differential pricing would be implemented at entrance stations. Currently, NPS staff do not check U.S. residency at park entrance points. Observers reportedly have expressed some concerns about the practicality of doing so—for instance, related to the extra time required for visitors to present proof of U.S. residency at entrance stations, or the challenges of determining a per-vehicle entrance fee when some but not all passengers are nonresidents. Such concerns could be exacerbated by overcrowding issues already facing some park units, including complaints about long lines at entrances. Some advocates of the surcharge have suggested that any traffic and wait times related to the differential pricing could be ameliorated by allowing international visitors to pay the surcharge electronically prior to a visit or by enforcing the surcharge at parking lots or other sites beyond the entrance station. S. 2308 and H.R. 4604 would provide that the surcharge could be collected by a third-party travel vendor.

With respect to online purchases of the ATB pass, questions could relate to the types of electronic documentation that would be required from both domestic and international purchasers of passes. Currently, online purchasers of some types of passes, such as free passes for active-duty military, must submit official documentation. For some other types of free or discounted passes, documentation is not required but qualifying individuals must self-affirm their status.

Many units of the National Park System do not charge entrance or recreation fees, and a consideration could be whether an international visitor surcharge would benefit non-fee-charging park units. To the extent that E.O. 14314 is interpreted to apply FLREA’s provisions for revenue distribution, that law allows for a portion of fee and pass revenues (typically 20%) to be available for agency-wide expenditures, and NPS has used these funds to address visitor needs at non-fee-charging park units. By contrast, S. 2308 and H.R. 4604 would provide that all proceeds from the NPS surcharge on international visitors would be retained at the unit collecting the surcharge. For ATB passes not purchased at a specific federal site (e.g., purchased online), FLREA provides for revenues to be shared among participating agencies according to interagency agreements. In S. 2308 and H.R. 4604, revenues from the surcharge on ATB Pass sales would be deposited in the LRF, which provides deferred maintenance funding for multiple agencies.

Congress could consider whether to conduct oversight of NPS’s implementation of E.O. 14314, such as assessing

revenue amounts, collection strategies, or impacts on international visitation. As discussed above, it could be difficult to establish a baseline against which to measure changes, given that NPS has not previously maintained data on fees collected specifically from international visitors.

Some observers have questioned whether FLREA’s fee-setting criteria allow for a surcharge on international visitors. Congress could consider whether to explicitly address such surcharges in statute, as proposed in S. 2308 and H.R. 4604. Congress could authorize, mandate, or prohibit such surcharges, or it could rely on current authorities as sufficient for agency interpretation.

Alternative Proposals

In the 116th Congress, S. 2783 proposed an alternative approach to raise revenue for the National Park System from international tourism. This bill would have increased fees for U.S. tourist visas, as well as for use of the Department of Homeland Security’s Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA, a requirement for those traveling under the Visa Waiver Program). The revenue would have been deposited into a new fund to address NPS’s “priority deferred maintenance needs.”

Such an approach could be preferred by some over an entrance fee increase, because it would not require NPS to validate U.S. residency at park entrance stations. By imposing charges on all international visitors to the United States (rather than just those who visit national parks), it also could raise more revenue but could potentially be seen as unfairly charging nonusers of the park system. Other issues might relate to potential impacts additional fees for international travelers could have on U.S. tourism. Some observers have raised concerns that other recent fee increases may deter visitors. For example, the FY2025 budget reconciliation act (P.L. 119-21) increases costs for international visitors, including by adding a new (potentially reimbursable) \$250 “visa integrity fee” and raising admission and ESTA fees. Because visa fees typically are based on the principle of reciprocity, another question could be whether other countries would increase fees for Americans traveling abroad.

As another alternative, some stakeholders have proposed to supplement NPS funding by raising fees for all park visitors, as opposed to just international travelers. Under FLREA’s authorities, NPS has periodically implemented fee changes across the park system, for example, in 2018. (Individual park units also may alter fees absent a system-wide initiative.) A 2017 proposal to more than double peak-season fees at some parks drew opposition (including from some Members of Congress) based on concerns about the affordability of park visits for Americans with varying income levels. The proposal also generated support from some stakeholders based on the potential for the increased fee revenues to address deferred maintenance and improve visitor services in the National Park System.

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