

National parks campgrounds targeted for privatization

Proposal to turn campsites over to private entities has opponents worried prices could skyrocket, but backers say it would be a cash boost

By **Rebecca Moss**, *The New Mexican*

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U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke says government shouldn't be in the business of running campgrounds, so he wants to turn national park campsites over to private businesses.

A handful of companies already run campsites, lodging and concessions throughout the U.S. park system, but some fear widespread privatization could make recreation and camping prohibitively expensive in Western states.

Environmental groups say Zinke's idea is in keeping with the Trump administration's push to turn public resources over to private entities, as well as to increase privatization of public services, from toll booths and air-traffic control to prisons.

Others say authorizing private businesses to run federal campgrounds might not change much at the campsites. But if privatization were to encroach further into the National Park Service, that could set the stage for profit motives to become more important than preservation.

More than 1.8 million people visited New Mexico's national parks and monuments last year, spending a collective \$108 million and generating more than 1,600 jobs, according to a study by Headwaters Economics, an independent research group based in Montana. White Sands National Monument, Carlsbad Caverns National Park and Bandelier National Monument are the most popular of the state's 15 national parks and monuments.

The majority of camping on public land for the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, costs under \$15 a day. Most camping on Bureau of Land Management property is free.

Developed BLM campgrounds charge fees. Those in New Mexico drew more than 67,000 paying campers and about 168,000 visitors in fiscal year 2016, according to Donna Hummel, a spokeswoman for the BLM.

Zinke's Department of the Interior has the power to privatize campgrounds, an idea that Aaron Weiss of the Center for Western Priorities opposes.

"Anything that makes visiting our national parks more expensive is not good for America and the American people. Camping on national public lands is and must continue to be an affordable family vacation," he said.

The Trump administration frames the issue of private companies on public lands differently. In a call with reporters last month, Zinke said: "We have not been a good partner with industry. We have not been a partner you can invest in."

Last week, he told members of the National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds he wanted to change that.

“I don’t want to be in the business of running campgrounds,” he said. “My folks will never be as good as you are on it.”

Privatized camping already occurs to some level throughout the nation, and most hotel properties within national parks are run by private companies.

Recreation Resource Management operates several private campgrounds in Cloudcroft, but privatization has not come to New Mexico to the degree it’s occurred in other states.

Valerie Gohlke, spokeswoman for Carlsbad Caverns National Park, said private camping “probably would not impact us greatly because we don’t have a lot of visitors who want to camp.”

Xanterra Parks & Resorts is the largest government contractor for hotel and concession services in national parks, including at the Grand Canyon. Aramark Parks and Destinations, Delaware North and Forever Resorts operate in bigger national parks, such as Yellowstone and Lake Powell.

The Center for American Progress found that these companies have contributed to congressional campaigns for several years, lobbying to keep contracts and trademarks associated with the parks.

Zinke said the Department of the Interior, which oversees the National Park Service and BLM, has an \$11.9 billion backlog of maintenance nationwide. He has said increasing fossil fuel extraction and privatization efforts for camping might help financially.

The Department of the Interior’s 2018 budget proposal called for a 10.9 percent cut in funding, including decreasing funding to park maintenance by 15 percent and cutting funding for national parks by 23 percent. This proposal has drawn criticism in Congress from members of both parties.

Private companies are contractually obligated to maintain the properties they operate in national parks. But the Center for American Progress found this doesn’t always happen. Instead, the organization said, some private companies have skirted these obligations and instead further added to the backlog of maintenance for which taxpayers are responsible.

All but one of New Mexico’s national parks had hundreds of thousands of dollars in deferred maintenance as of 2016, totaling more than \$213 million, according to National Park Service documents. Carlsbad Caverns National Park has the highest backlog, with \$44 million in deferred maintenance, about half for a modernized elevator system. Of the overall total, \$16 million in maintenance is considered critical, according to the federal budget. The backlog at Bandelier National Monument is \$23 million and it’s \$17 million at Chaco Canyon National Historical Park.

In April, President Donald Trump told the Department of the Interior to review recent national monument designations, saying many were made through abuses of executive power. The action could roll back protections for wilderness and historic lands established under the Antiquities Act since the Clinton administration in the 1990s.

The Trump administration has also called for opening up oil and gas drilling on federal land and resuming extraction of coal, which could infringe on national parks and monuments if protections are removed.

A study published last week said opening up drilling and expediting permitting on BLM property would threaten seven national parks, including Chaco Culture National Historical Park and Carlsbad Caverns.

“The Southwest’s national parks are among the most visited in the country, drawing millions of people each year with their jaw-dropping scenic wonders and recreational opportunities and supporting strong tourism economies and local jobs,” said Nicholas Lund, with the National Parks Conservation Association and author of the report, in a statement. “Risks to these spectacular desert parks and tourism industries they support must be considered alongside proposals for oil and gas drilling right at these parks’ doorsteps.”

Chris Mehl with Headwaters Economics said privatization could help to address maintenance deficiencies if private companies assume the responsibility, but that is not a guarantee.

“A lot of things in the park are already privatized, so for some users, it might not be a big change,” he said. “The first question would be the efficacy of it. Can they operate the campground at the level of service the public expects? And the second question is, ‘Can it save taxpayers more – or save money – as Zinke said it will?’”

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Campers from Albuquerque stay at the Juniper Family Campground in the Bandelier National Monument Friday (June 9). U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke wants to privatize camping in national parks, saying the move would be a cash infusion for maintenance at facilities.

Clyde Mueller/ The New Mexican

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