

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Revenues from Fees and Donations Increased, but Some Enhancements Are Needed to Continue This Trend

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-166](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Park Service manages 409 park units that cover 84 million acres. Park Service funding is generally composed of annual appropriations along with revenues from recreation fees, commercial service fees, and philanthropic donations. GAO was asked to review the Park Service's collection of these fees and donations.

This report examines the Park Service's (1) overall funding trends for fiscal years 2005 through 2014; (2) trends in revenues from fees and donations; and (3) efforts to increase revenues and donations, and factors that affected these efforts. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed budget data for fiscal years 2005 through 2014 on the Park Service's overall funding and fee revenue and donations. GAO also reviewed laws, examined Park Service reports, and interviewed agency officials and stakeholders, such as nonprofit partners and concessioners.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider amending FLREA so that the federal agencies that charge recreation fees can determine whether to adjust the price of a senior pass. GAO also recommends that the Department of the Interior direct the Park Service to revise its guidance to periodically review entrance fees and direct park units to provide information on their decisions to not increase fees. Interior concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-166](#). For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The National Park Service's (Park Service) total funding did not keep pace with inflation for fiscal years 2005 through 2014, even as fees and donations increased. Total funding increased in nominal dollars from \$2.7 billion to \$3.1 billion (15 percent) during this period, but declined by 3 percent after adjusting for inflation. Annual appropriations, which comprised about 88 percent of total funding on average, declined 8 percent after adjusting for inflation. Fees, donations, and other funding sources, which accounted for the remainder, increased 39 percent after adjusting for inflation.

Revenues from fees and donations grew for fiscal years 2005 through 2014 to varying degrees. Specifically, revenues from recreation fees, which include entrance and amenity fees for facilities such as campsites, increased from about \$148 million to \$186 million (26 percent). Revenues from fees from concessions operations, which comprise the vast majority of commercial service fees, nearly tripled from almost \$29 million to \$85 million. Meanwhile, cash donations from philanthropic sources fluctuated, ranging from \$19.5 million in fiscal year 2011 to \$94.7 million in fiscal year 2014.

The Park Service has efforts under way to increase revenues from fees and donations, but certain factors limit these efforts. For recreation fees, the Park Service updated its fee schedule, and several park units increased entrance and amenity fees. However, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) does not give the Park Service and other agencies that charge recreation fees the authority to adjust the price of a lifetime senior pass, which has been \$10 since 1993. GAO's guide on user fees states that federal agencies should regularly review fees and make changes if warranted. Without the authority to modify the price of the senior pass, the Park Service is limited in its ability to increase revenue from this fee. In addition, Park Service guidance on recreation fees directs the agency to ensure its fees are set at a reasonable level, but does not call for periodic reviews of these fees, and the agency has no plans to do so. The agency also does not require park units to provide information on decisions to not change their fees or deviate from the fee schedule because decisions about raising fees are left to the park units. As a result, the Park Service is missing opportunities to ensure that its entrance fees are reasonable. To increase commercial service revenues, the Park Service increased minimum franchise fees that concessioners pay, and some park units have developed leasing programs. Several factors, such as limited competition for some concessions contracts, complicate efforts to increase these fees. For philanthropic donations, the Park Service has launched fundraising and public outreach campaigns in conjunction with its centennial anniversary in 2016 and has modified fundraising policies to increase donation opportunities. According to agency officials, several factors hamper the agency's ability to increase donations, such as projects that need funding are not always attractive to donors.