



Improving the Visitor Experience at National Parks Through Contemporary Concessioner Operations

- On July 20, 2020, the National Park Service (NPS) published a Proposed Rule in the *Federal Register* outlining planned **modifications in its concessions program to improve visitor experiences**. The modifications are the first substantial changes to concessions program regulations in twenty years.
- Concessioners now serve nearly one in three national park visitors, operating in about 100 park units. They provide goods and services valued at more than \$1.5 billion annually and provide NPS funding greater than \$135 million annually. **Concessioners are authorized to provide necessary and appropriate in-park services including lodging, food, transportation, retail operations offering food, clothing outdoor equipment, Native American art and more as well as outfitter and guide services**. Concessioner operations in parks extend back even prior to the creation of the NPS.
- **Most of the iconic visitor facilities in national parks, including the great lodges, were built with private capital by concessioners and have been operated and maintained by concessioners even though the facilities are owned by the American people through the NPS**. Concessioners are especially proud of numerous awards for outstanding “green” operations and for a leading role in supporting sustainable enjoyment of parks through outstanding hospitality and visitor management skills.
- The changes in regulations proposed by NPS “would reduce administrative burdens for concessioners to promote competition, provide **more flexibility to add new services and encourage investment in concession facilities**,” according to the news release issued by the Interior Department on the proposal.
- In comments supporting the proposed changes to concessions program regulations, NPHA – the trade association of the park concessions industry – underscored that the new flexibility under the Proposed Rule would **support better protection of park resources and aid the safety and sustainable enjoyment of park visitors** – the dual missions of the NPS in its 1916 Organic Act.
- NPHA is pleased by opportunities under the new rule to **expand needed visitor services in less visited park units** with great stories to tell and the capacity to host more visitors and increased opportunity for concessioners to **modernize NPS’ developed campgrounds**, which have seen significant declines in overnight stays at least in part because of inadequate restrooms, campsites poorly designed for current campers, limited educational and interpretive facilities, lack of broadband connectivity and more.
- **NPS determines whether visitor services in parks are necessary and appropriate. Nothing in the proposed rule alters that. NPS also approves prices charged by concessioners**. This proposed rule continues that but recognizes clear Congressional direction in 1998 legislation to reduce the burden of price approvals on concessioners and recognize new technologies travelers use to compare and select accommodations and services.
- The proposed rule **continues a long tradition of private investment in public infrastructure enjoyed by park visitors and clarifies the processes which allow concessioners to earn back these investments**. In addition, NPS proposes to **incentivize concessioners to deliver superior visitor services and to mitigate the impact of unforeseen challenges** which adversely impact concessioner operations, such as COVID-19, government shutdowns wildfires and other disasters.
- Additional information on the proposed rule and NPHA’s suggestions are at www.parkpartners.org . You are encouraged to comment on the rule by September 18, 2020, at <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/07/20/2020-15650/commercial-visitor-services-concession-contracts>