



## Recreational Fee Program Proposed Changes May 24, 2016

### Introduction

Park management is considering changes in the future amounts and/or manner in which certain recreation fees are collected in the park:

- A general increase in frontcountry camping and picnic pavilion fees to compensate for inflationary operating costs, including rising salary costs, over the past 10 years since the last general increase in frontcountry camping and pavilion fee rates. Revenues are also needed to rehabilitate campground facilities and other critical park infrastructure.
- Adding Abrams Creek, Balsam Mountain and Big Creek campgrounds to the National Recreation Reservation System (accessed at Recreation.gov or by phone) and requiring advanced reservation and payment prior to arrival in the park.

The purpose of this document is to provide park stakeholders and the general public details about the proposal, reasons for doing so, and to solicit feedback on this proposal.

### What are the reasons for the changes?

- **Campground and Picnic Pavilion Fee Increases:**
  - The park has not increased fees in campgrounds since 2006 or, in the case of some campgrounds, even earlier, except for a \$3 increase in Cataloochee Campground when it was added to the reservation system Recreation.gov in 2011. However, during the past 10 years, inflation and rising salary costs have affected the cost of providing services and managing facilities, including personnel and supplies and material costs. The park proposes to increase camping and picnic pavilion fees to meet the rising costs of operations, reduce a backlog of maintenance requirements on park facilities, and initiate needed improvements; all of which contribute to a safe and enjoyable visitor experience. In recent years, the park has compensated for budget imbalances due to inflation by reducing visitor services, delaying maintenance repairs and improvements which would enhance visitor experiences, and in some cases, reducing the length of the season each year when facilities are open, having a particularly adverse impact on visitors during shoulder seasons.
  - Recreation fee money provides critical revenue for the park to maintain infrastructure and services. Unlike most large national parks, the Smokies does not charge an entrance fee and therefore has limited means for maintaining levels of service the public has come to expect.
  - The National Park Service (NPS) is a not-for-profit agency and NPS policy maintains that fees for services like camping and pavilions are set so as not to create unfair competition with private sector facilities in the area or put them

at a disadvantage. The park completed a 2016 comparability study with campgrounds in the surrounding communities and the study revealed that, while park camping fees have remained largely constant since 2006, campgrounds in the surrounding communities have continued to rise. Even with a 25% fee increase, park campgrounds would remain among the least expensive in the area.

- **Management of Abrams Creek, Balsam Mountain and Big Creek Campgrounds:**

- The three smallest family campgrounds in the park, ranging in size from 12 campsites at Big Creek to 46 campsites at Balsam Mountain Campground, have been managed using a first-come, first-served self-registration system. Since all three campgrounds are located in geographically remote areas of the park, the amount of staff time involved in collecting, counting, and depositing campground revenue makes operating the campgrounds a very costly program. In order to improve efficiency and allow for the use of revenue to be spent more on visitor enhancement and less on cost of collection, the park proposes to add all three campgrounds to the National Recreation Reservation System, Recreation.gov, and require that campers make advanced reservations. Managing the campgrounds in this manner alleviates the burden of having staff collect, count, transport, and deposit campground money. Additionally, when making a reservation, each camper is advised of pertinent area information as well as rules and regulations, increasing the likelihood of visitor compliance and in turn improving resource protection.
- Similar to when Cataloochee Campground switched to this system in 2011, many visitors would benefit by knowing they have secured a site prior to traveling to a smaller campground located in a more remote area. Once the reservation system has been set up, campground reservations may be made by telephone or online. Expanded trip-planning information will be available on the website as well, often allowing potential campers to discover a lesser known and/or less often used campground.
- The park has used Recreation.gov to manage some campgrounds and picnic pavilions since 2007 and currently operates 26 facilities or events using this national system.

#### **What are the details behind what is proposed?**

- **Campground & Picnic Pavilion Fees:** The park proposes to increase the fees for all frontcountry campsites and picnic pavilions by a whole-dollar amount that is approximately 25% higher than current fees. Please see the attached table for specific information.
- **New Reservation System Campgrounds:** The park proposes to add Abrams Creek, Balsam Mountain and Big Creek Campgrounds to the National Recreation Reservation System, Recreation.gov. Reservations prior to arrival at the campgrounds, made on-line or by telephone, would be required for all sites at each of the three campgrounds.

## **When would the proposed changes take place?**

- If approved, all proposed changes could take effect as early as October 1, 2016; however, implementation of some changes may be deferred until the 2017 season.

## **How are the collected revenues used?**

- The collection and expenditure of recreational fees at the Smokies is authorized and regulated through the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, as amended, and the Federal Lands and Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) of 2004. By law, the park retains 100 percent of recreation fees collected in the park to support park operations<sup>1</sup>.
- Most campground and pavilion revenues are spent in one of three areas of park operations:
  - Operations: The majority of campground and pavilion revenues fund salaries of staff associated with providing services in campgrounds and picnic grounds, such as registering and assisting campers; cleaning restrooms and fire grates; maintaining fee area grounds, utilities, and facilities; providing law enforcement and emergency services; and administering the collection of fees. Revenues also cover the cost of utilities, restroom supplies, and other materials in campgrounds and picnic areas. The increase in revenues will sustain operations in campgrounds and picnic areas and partially restore longer seasons at some sites where seasons have been shortened to compensate for inflationary costs.
  - Rehabilitation Projects: Revenues collected at campgrounds and picnic pavilions have been used to rehabilitate campgrounds and picnic areas such as replacing picnic tables and fire grates; making capital repairs of restrooms and other fee area facilities; pouring concrete parking pads; road resurfacing; utility repairs; and removing hazard trees. The fee increase will enable managers to continue to maintain these facilities in good condition.
  - Other Deferred Maintenance Backlog & Special Projects: In the past, revenues collected at campgrounds and picnic pavilions have been used on other important park projects, including repairing park facilities beyond campgrounds and supporting other visitor services. Emphasis on the use of additional revenues will be placed on hazard tree removal in frontcountry areas and on critical maintenance backlog projects, such as rehabilitating the park's obsolete radio system that is used by emergency service responders and is increasingly at risk of failure.
- A proposed fee increase of 25% in campgrounds and picnic pavilions would generate approximately \$400,000 of additional revenue per year. Although this amount will not solve all of the budget challenges, the additional revenues will at least help to sustain campground and picnic area operations and support other critical park functions.

## **Does this effect backcountry camping fees?**

- No – there are no proposed changes to backcountry camping fees.

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<sup>1</sup> A minor exception is that 20% of revenues collected from the sale of interagency passes are expended on special projects across the NPS.

## **Will this change the status of Look Rock Campground?**

- No, at this time, it will remain closed. In 2013 Look Rock Campground and picnic area were closed due to funding shortfalls that year, combined with a deteriorating water system. Managers do not feel that, in the current budgetary climate, it would be fiscally responsible to spend the \$900,000+ necessary to repair the utility system when there is such a large backlog of other infrastructure repair needs in the park that may arguably be of higher priority. Look Rock was one of the least used of the 10 campgrounds in the park and is the only one detached from the main body of the park.

## **How do I comment?**

- A public comment period will begin on May 26, 2016 and remain open through June 27, 2016.
- Written comments regarding this proposal may be submitted electronically via the National Park Service's Planning, Environmental and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grsm>. Click on "Proposal to Increase Fees at Great Smoky Mountains National Park."
- Written comments will also be accepted by mail or e-mail addressed as follows:
  - Mail: Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Attn: Proposal to Increase Fees, 107 Park Headquarters Road, Gatlinburg, TN 37738
  - E-mail: [GRSM\\_Fee\\_Management@nps.gov](mailto:GRSM_Fee_Management@nps.gov)
- The park will hold two informational open houses regarding this proposal; and partners, cooperators, stakeholder representatives and the general public are invited to drop by.
  - June 20, 2016: Old Oconaluftee Visitor Center, 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.  
1194 Newfound Gap Road, Cherokee, NC 28719
  - June 23, 2016: Park Headquarters Lobby, 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.  
107 Park Headquarters Road, Gatlinburg, TN 37738
- Comments submitted anonymously will not be accepted. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment (including your personal identifying information) is subject to the Freedom of Information Act and may be made publicly available. While you may request in your comment to withhold your personal identifying from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will legally be able to do so.

Following the comment period, feedback will be used to determine how or if a fee increase will be implemented.

**All public comments must be received by June 27, 2016.**



**2016 Recreation Fee Proposal – Frontcountry Campgrounds and Picnic Pavilions**

<b>Family Campgrounds</b>	<b>2016 Fee</b>	<b>2016 Senior/Access</b>	<b>Proposed Fee</b>	<b>Senior/Access</b>
Abrams Creek	\$14.00	\$7.00	\$18.00	\$9.00
Balsam Mountain	\$14.00	\$7.00	\$18.00	\$9.00
Big Creek	\$14.00	\$7.00	\$18.00	\$9.00
Cades Cove (May 15- Oct 31)	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Cades Cove (Nov 1-May 14)	\$17.00	\$8.50	\$21.00	\$10.50
Cataloochee	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Cosby	\$14.00	\$7.00	\$18.00	\$9.00
Deep Creek	\$17.00	\$8.50	\$21.00	\$10.50
Elkmont (May 15- Oct 31)	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Elkmont River (May 15- Oct 31)	\$23.00	\$11.00	\$29.00	\$14.50
Elkmont (Off-season)	\$17.00	\$8.50	\$21.00	\$10.50
Smokemont (May 15- Oct 31)	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Smokemont (Nov 1- May 14)	\$17.00	\$8.50	\$21.00	\$10.50

<b>Group Campgrounds</b>	<b>2016 Fee</b>	<b>2016 Senior/Access</b>	<b>Proposed Fee</b>	<b>Senior/Access</b>
Big Creek (25 Person)	\$44.00	N/A	\$55.00	N/A
Cades Cove (20 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A
Cades Cove (30 Person)	\$53.00	N/A	\$66.00	N/A
Cades Cove (30 person w/Pavilion)	\$65.00	N/A	\$81.00	N/A
Cataloochee (25 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A
Cosby (20 Person)	\$26.00	N/A	\$33.00	N/A
Deep Creek (20 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A



GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

<b>Group Campgrounds (continued)</b>	<b>2016 Fee</b>	<b>2016 Senior/Access</b>	<b>Proposed Fee</b>	<b>Senior/Access</b>
Elkmont (15 Person)	\$26.00	N/A	\$33.00	N/A
Elkmont (20 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A
Elkmont (30 Person)	\$53.00	N/A	\$66.00	N/A
Smokemont (20 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A

<b>Horse Campgrounds</b>	<b>2016 Fee</b>	<b>2016 Senior/Access</b>	<b>Proposed Fee</b>	<b>Senior/Access</b>
Anthony Creek	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Big Creek	\$25.00	\$12.50	\$31.00	\$15.50
Cataloochee	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Round Bottom	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50
Tow String	\$20.00	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$12.50

<b>Picnic Pavilions</b>	<b>2016 Fee</b>	<b>2016 Senior/Access</b>	<b>Proposed Fee</b>	<b>Senior/Access</b>
Collins Creek (Half Day)	\$20.00	N/A	\$25.00	N/A
Cosby (Half Day)	\$20.00	N/A	\$25.00	N/A
Deep Creek (Half Day)	\$20.00	N/A	\$25.00	N/A
Greenbrier (Half Day)	\$10.00	N/A	\$13.00	N/A
Metcalf Bottoms (Half Day)	\$20.00	N/A	\$25.00	N/A
Twin Creeks (Full Day: Upto50 Person)	\$35.00	N/A	\$44.00	N/A
Twin Creeks (Full Day: 51 – 100 Person)	\$55.00	N/A	\$69.00	N/A
Twin Creeks (Full Day:101-150 Person)	\$75.00	N/A	\$94.00	N/A