

MAMMOTH LAKES RECREATION STAFF REPORT

Title: Yosemite National Park Visitor Access Management Draft Plan and Environmental Assessment Public Comment.

Meeting Date: September 24, 2024

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RECOMMENDATION:

Request for Mammoth Lakes Recreation Board to provide direction on staff proposed comments related to the Visitor Access Management Plan Draft and authorize staff to provide a letter of public comment by the September 30, 2024, deadline.

BACKGROUND:

Yosemite National Park has been working on plans to address impacts on the natural environment from visitation. The purpose of the visitor access management plan is to reduce overcrowding and traffic congestion, expand tools to better pace vehicle volume into the park, and provide equitable visitor access to inspirational experiences while ensuring operational sustainability and protection of Yosemite National Park's exemplary natural and cultural resources.

The visitor access management plan is needed to provide park managers with a comprehensive and long-term approach to manage day use visitor access to the park in a way that protects natural and cultural resources, maintains positive visitor experiences, promotes visitor and staff safety, and supports the ability of park staff to maintain facilities and perform daily operations. The plan is needed to allow park managers to maintain desired conditions throughout the park, including the 94% of the park area that is managed as wilderness, and manage day use visitation temporally and spatially.

This process has engaged the public and interested parties in a transparent civic and stakeholder engagement process to discuss issues and opportunities, and specific strategies and ideas. The park is also applying lessons learned during the reservation systems from 2020-2022, while considering a range of strategies to address crowding and congestion and improve the visitor experience and resource conditions within the park.

The planning team reviewed comments received during the civic engagement period (December 2022 to February 2023) to develop preliminary ideas to address key issues and opportunities. The planning team reviewed comments from the second round of public engagement (July 2023 to September 2023) to develop the preliminary management scenarios under review. The full plan document can be found using the following link: [Draft Plan and Environmental Assessment](#)

ANALYSIS:

Staff has provided a brief synopsis of the alternatives proposed by the National Park Service (NPS) along with staff observations on each alternative.

Alternative A: No Action, Continue Current Management

Alternative A represents no change to management practices that existed prior to the pilot reservation systems used in the summer 2020-2022 and 2024. The National Park Service (NPS) would close areas of the park when visitor demand for parking lots exceeds supply. Staff observations of this alternative:

- Maintains pre-COVID access to Yosemite National Park.
- Allows for the greatest amount of visitor flexibility.
- Still allows for park officials to temporarily close or limit access to certain areas of the park based on congestion or visitor use.
- Overall, park congestion is not addressed in this alternative.
- Visitors *could* experience long delays at entrance gates.

Alternative B: Parkwide Reservations: Peak Hours, Daily

Under alternative B, visitors would need one parkwide reservation to enter all areas of Yosemite National Park at any time during peak hours. This reservation would be valid for a three-day period, allowing visitors to enter and leave the park at any time within their three-day reservation window. Staff observations of this alternative:

- Eliminates the ability for many to be spontaneous when it comes to enjoying or experiencing their public lands.
- Favors people with access to reliable internet.
- Favors people who are able to be at a computer or phone at the appropriate time to claim these popular reservations.
- Creates unintended consequences with ancillary program areas such as Wilderness. Many people will book wilderness permits and use them only to access the park, and not the wilderness as intended.
- Addresses congestion and visitor experience by limiting the number of people into the entirety of the park.
- Allows for freedom of movement throughout the park over a 3 day span.
- This is the park preferred option.
- Does not address negative effects on nearby communities or public lands and many people illegally camp in these areas so they can get up early and access the Park before 5 a.m.
- Too much of a one size fits all approach that does not address varying levels of visitation in different areas of the park. IE, all park areas are being treated like they face the overcrowding we are seeing in the Valley.

Alternative C: Parkwide Reservations: Timed Entry

Under alternative C, one parkwide timed-entry reservation would be required to enter all areas of Yosemite National Park. Timed-entry reservations would be valid for one day, with visitors required to arrive at Yosemite National Park during their designated window of time. Staff observations of this alternative:

- Compared to Alternative B, further restricts park access and ability to be spontaneous by limiting reservation to 1 day.
- Traffic, accidents, or other events outside the visitor's control can occur and result in a visitor missing their *designated window of time*, thus being denied access to the park even if they possess a reservation.
- Favors people with access to reliable internet.
- Favors people who are able to be at a computer or phone at the appropriate time to claim these popular reservations.
- Creates unintended consequences with ancillary program areas such as Wilderness. Many people will book wilderness permits and use them only to access the park, and not the wilderness as intended.
- Addresses congestion and visitor experience by limiting the number of people into the entirety of the park.
- Does not address negative effects on nearby communities or public lands and many people illegally camp in these areas so they can get up early and access the Park before 5 a.m.
- Too much of a one size fits all approach that does not address varying levels of visitation in different areas of the park. IE, all park areas are being treated like they face the overcrowding we are seeing in the Valley.

Alternative D: Yosemite Valley Access Reservations: Timed Entry

Under alternative D, a timed-entry reservation would be required for day users to enter Yosemite Valley in a private vehicle. Those with a Yosemite Valley access reservation would be able to access all areas of the park, including Yosemite Valley, for one day. Those without a Yosemite Valley access reservation would be able to access all areas of the park outside of Yosemite Valley in a personal vehicle but would not be able to enter Yosemite Valley with their personal vehicle during the reservation period. Access to Yosemite Valley would be open to these visitors after all reservation windows have closed. Staff observations of this alternative:

- Addresses issues related to access, congestion, and visitor experience in the area of the park that receives, by far, the most visitation.
- Takes an incremental approach to first address the untenable visitor demand in the area getting hit the hardest, the Valley, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach for the entirety of the park.

- Could regulation of the valley have unintended consequences and create congestion and lines in other areas of the park where this did not exist prior?
- Will allow for Valley wilderness permits to be reserved simply to access the Valley.
- Allows for spontaneity in the majority of the park, while allowing these visitors to access the Valley before 5 a.m. or after 6 p.m.
- Will result in a larger infrastructure burden on the NPS to build the structures needed to regulate Valley traffic in this manner.

In all of the management plans provided, local transportation through the park will be maintained (with an approved zip code shown on a valid CA driver license) and removal or changes to that policy are not being considered.

Proposed Comments

Yosemite National Park is a treasured amenity for our local tourism-based economy. Not unlike challenges we see in the Town of Mammoth Lakes, we must take steps to preserve the natural resources, through mitigating efforts, while still providing public access to public lands. This balance is crucial for our success.

These overcrowding issues are not unique to Yosemite and throughout the National Park System, many solutions have been employed to address these concerns. Yosemite National Park is unique in the fact it provides transit through the Sierra Nevada mountain range that is critical to local access. It also contains high density, end point destinations that are not a part of this transit and can be more tightly managed. This need for management within specific elements of the park while providing appropriate public access, most closely aligns with alternative D.

Staff believe the following comments reflect concerns about alternative B and C and support for alternative D.

Public Access

Highly impacted areas of the park do require some form of mitigation. However, visitor disbursement, into areas less congested and still providing the Yosemite experience, is critical. Many of our visitors and locals prefer the experience of back country excursions and choose to recreate in the Tuolumne Meadows area where many hiking trails exist. Access to these sections of the park should be maintained to provide access to locals for a quick day trip as well as exposure for visitors who were unable to gain access to the highly impacted areas. Providing limited access or shuttle requirements into the more impacted areas like the valley, could be achieved as they are end point destinations and not a part of the required transit route across the mountains. Many examples of this shuttle only access exist throughout the National Park system.

Wildlife Hazards

One of the unintended consequences of the restricted access during peak times is the increased vehicle traffic into the park before 5:00 am. The NPS reported this activity has increased 10-fold during the pilot period. The study does address the concerns about

vehicle collisions with wildlife within the park. However, the same impacts can occur within Mono County as this increased traffic on our roadways has a negative impact on nocturnal animals like deer and bear. The potential for these collisions increases greatly as more vehicles are on the road during peak movement times, posing significant risk to wildlife.

Public Safety

Similar to the concerns on vehicle and wildlife collisions, increased vehicle traffic during early morning hours poses increased risk to public safety. Hwy 120 West, accessing Yosemite National Park is a steep road with many hazards often difficult for some to navigate. There is a high degree of consequence for even small mistakes made by unfamiliar or inattentive drivers. In addition, emergency services for Mono County are at a significantly reduced capacity during these early morning hours. Since access through the park must be maintained, closing access before 5:00 am is not an option. However, removal of the entrance restrictions will reduce travel prior to 5:00 am.

There are also enhancements that should be considered regardless of the alternative management plan that is selected.

Increased use of Technology

Streamlined Access - The process by which vehicles are checked into the park has not evolved with technology. The longest wait line notification for Tioga entrance is 90 minutes and vehicles often wait that long to access the park. There are still a large number of vehicles with internal combustion engines which remain idling in this line. Using technology to provide access to those vehicles with a pass could eliminate these long wait times and environmental impacts.

Realtime Monitoring – A system of real-time active monitoring of parking lots and trail access could serve to inform the rangers of visitation impacts before they reach critical mass. They could also serve to direct visitors to less crowded areas of the park, therefore achieving the disbursement desired. Effort in this space is a more costly but refined approach rather than complete restriction.

CONCLUSION:

Staff is preparing a set of draft comments based on statements provided above. This comment letter is due by September 30, 2024. The intent of this presentation is to provide the Mammoth Lakes Recreation Board an opportunity to review these comments and make recommended adjustments prior to the final document. In general, the goal should be not to accomplish what is easiest or familiar, rather to provide the highest level of experience, equity, and access while protecting Yosemite's abundant natural and cultural resources.