



Modernizing Park Fee Structure to Maintain Public Lands and Support America's Group Travel Economy

Executive Summary

The American Bus Association (ABA) appreciates the National Park Service's (NPS) commitment to modernizing operations to enhance access, improve visitor experience, and strengthen the long-term stewardship of our national parks. ABA shares these goals and supports efforts to identify sustainable revenue sources that help maintain and protect our public lands.

However, we have significant concerns about the proposed per-person surcharge on non-U.S. citizens and residents as it applies to passengers of group tours operated by Commercial Use Authorization (CUA) permit holders. As written, the policy would introduce a complex and unpredictable cost structure for group travel at some of the nation's most visited parks. Commercial tour operators frequently serve mixed groups of domestic and international passengers and often finalize passenger manifests close to departure, making compliance with varying per-person fees exceptionally challenging for both operators and NPS staff.

Because tours are typically priced and contracted 12 to 18 months in advance, the late-stage and variable nature of these fees would disrupt established pricing models and create uncertainty for businesses and travelers. This uncertainty could dampen international visitation and, in turn, affect the economic activity supported by bus and group travel—an industry that contributes \$69.8 billion in direct traveler spending across transportation, lodging, and food services. Gateway communities and the broader tourism economy rely on predictable group travel patterns, and maintaining that stability is essential.

To support NPS's objectives while ensuring operational clarity, the Coalition recommends an alternative approach: predictable annual adjustments to commercial vehicle entrance fees, paired with clear statutory confirmation that per-passenger entrance fees do not apply to commercial tour passengers. This framework would give NPS dependable funding growth while preserving the operational feasibility and economic vitality that benefit parks, visitors, and surrounding communities alike.

Background and Challenges of an International Visitor Fee for CUAs

NPS is implementing a new fee structure beginning January 1, 2026, which introduces a \$100 per-person surcharge for non-U.S. citizens and non-residents ages 16 and older at 11 of the country's most visited national parks—Acadia, Bryce Canyon, Everglades, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain, Sequoia & Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion. In addition, the annual America the Beautiful pass for international visitors will rise to \$250, compared to the \$80 rate for U.S. residents. These changes are intended to generate new revenue for deferred maintenance and infrastructure needs, with parks such as Yellowstone projected to see substantial revenue increases.

Despite these goals, the new per-person non-citizen surcharge presents serious challenges for CUA permit holders. Most private motorcoaches and tour operators operating under CUAs carry mixed groups of domestic and international travelers. Given that itineraries, manifests, and group compositions frequently change until the day of departure, accurately tracking each traveler's nationality would be highly impractical and would introduce significant administrative burdens for operators and NPS staff alike—especially for small and mid-sized companies lacking compliance resources.

Implementing, verifying, and enforcing a nationality-based fee structure would require operators and NPS staff to collect sensitive personal data, establish standardized verification protocols, delay or interrupt the tour and travel experience, and maintain real-time reporting systems. These requirements exceed the administrative capacity of many operators and park units and would likely lead to inconsistent or unenforceable compliance standards.

Economic and Logistical Impacts

Impacts on Local Gateway Economies

Gateway communities rely heavily on international group travel to sustain hotels, restaurants, retailers, attractions, and seasonal employment. International visitors typically stay longer, spend more, and generate broader economic benefits than domestic travelers. Accordingly, even modest reductions in international group volume would have outsized effects on rural communities whose economies depend largely on national-park visitation.

A per-passenger fee targeting international travelers could:

- Reduce international group volume, lowering demand across hotels, restaurants, and tour services.

- Shorten lengths of stay as operators adjust itineraries to manage increased costs.
- Decrease seasonal hiring and destabilize small businesses dependent on reliable group volume.
- Reduce local tax revenues tied to lodging and tourism spending.

Impacts on the U.S. Tourism Industry

The U.S. faces intensifying global competition for long-haul travelers from destinations that have streamlined entry processes and reduced travel costs. The motorcoach sector alone generated an estimated 37.6 billion passenger miles in 2024, with \$69.8 billion in direct traveler spending across transportation, lodging, food, and beverages. This activity produced a total economic impact of \$158 billion and supported 890,031 jobs while generating \$27.7 billion in tax revenue.¹

CUA tour operators already report a 30% decline in international visitor bookings in 2025. Adding a new per-passenger fee targeted at international travelers risks accelerating this decline, reducing U.S. competitiveness relative to Canada, Australia, and the EU, and shrinking the economic multiplier associated with inbound travel.

Impacts on Private Motorcoach Operators and Group-Travel Businesses

Commercial tour operators plan, price, and contract itineraries 12–18 months in advance. This long planning cycle is essential to the business model, allowing operators to provide guaranteed pricing to international partners and group leaders.

Because of this structure:

- Sudden or unpredictable fee changes can invalidate published prices, forcing operators to absorb unexpected costs.
- New international per-passenger fees introduced for 2026 would be financially unmanageable because 2026 trips were sold in 2025.
- Operators may be forced to cancel departures or remove national-park components entirely, diminishing public access.

A policy that alters cost structures without sufficient lead time risks disrupting entire sales cycles and harming both domestic and international travel to national parks.

¹ American Bus Association. (2025). 2024 Economic Impact of Motorcoach Group Travel in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.buses.org/aba-foundation-research-summary/economic-impact-of-motorcoach-group-travel-in-the-united-states-2024/>.

International Context

Canada provides a model for modernized fee structures that support parks without burdening the group-travel industry. Parks Canada has strengthened the competitiveness of its tourism sector by raising revenue for maintenance while suspending additional commercial tour fees. If the U.S. adopts nationality-based per-passenger fees, it risks further erosion of international market share and reduced demand for nature-based tourism.

CUA Modernization Proposal: A Practical and Effective Alternative

To balance park maintenance needs with the operational realities of the group travel industry, this proposal outlines targeted updates designed to enhance access, improve the visitor experience, and strengthen the long-term stewardship of our national parks. Implementing these updates on a timeline that aligns with existing contracts and scheduled trips would support greater predictability, transparency, and data accuracy while avoiding undue burdens on operators.

1. Fee Structure Modernization (2027–2036)

Predictable Fee Growth

Authorize NPS to implement a predictable 5% annual growth rate for commercial vehicle park entrance fees. Advanced notice is essential because group tours are contracted 12–18 months ahead of travel. A clear adjustment schedule allows operators to update pricing, contracts, and itineraries without disrupting already-sold tours.

Clarity on Per-Passenger Fees

Provide statutory clarification that per-passenger entrance fees do **not** apply to commercial tour passengers—including sightseeing, interpretive, historical, or shuttle-based tours. This eliminates mid-season surprises, ends inconsistent park-by-park interpretations, and aligns with long-standing industry practice.

Benefits:

- Generates dedicated revenue for maintenance and conservation.
- Ensures predictable, forward-looking fee adjustments.
- Eliminates confusion around per-passenger fees.
- Maintains U.S. competitiveness in the international tourism market.

2. National Aggregation of Existing CUA Reports

Current Situation

NPS prepares annual CUA program reports for individual parks, but these reports are not aggregated into a national summary. As a result, policymakers lack systemwide visibility into commercial activity and revenue.

Required Legislative Change

Direct the Department of the Interior to compile park-level CUA reports into one standardized national report included annually with DOI's GAOA submission. This should include:

- Total number of CUAs issued across all parks
- Activity types and service categories
- Aggregated visitation and use metrics
- Identified resource or operational impacts
- Comprehensive accounting of CUA-related revenue:
 - Application-fee totals
 - Other CUA fee totals
 - Commercial entrance-fee totals associated with CUA activity

Benefits:

- Creates the first systemwide snapshot of commercial activity and revenue.
- Enhances transparency and improves GAOA oversight.
- Requires no new reporting from operators—only aggregation of existing NPS data.

Recommendation for Implementation Timeline

In light of the economic, administrative, and logistical challenges outlined above, we strongly urge the Department of the Interior and NPS to delay the January 1, 2026, implementation of new international per-passenger fees as they apply to passengers of CUA-permitted commercial tour passengers. A collaborative approach and reasonable timeline would enable development of a workable, predictable, and transparent CUA modernization framework that supports park conservation goals without harming U.S. businesses, American jobs, gateway communities, or international tourism competitiveness.