

December 31, 2014

Tracy Swartout, Acting Superintendent  
ATTN: Proposed Recreation Fee Increases  
Mount Rainier National Park  
55210 238th Ave East  
Ashford, WA 98304

Dear Acting Superintendent Swartout,

On behalf of American Whitewater, The Mountaineers and Washington Trails Association, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on Mt. Rainier National Park's proposed recreation fee increases. We also appreciated your involvement and the information shared at the November meeting held in Seattle.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with over 6,000 individual members and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater paddlers across the nation. American Whitewater's mission is to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The protection of wilderness waterways was among our founding principles. Olympic National Park is nationally recognized as a destination for backcountry paddling in a wilderness setting.

The Mountaineers, founded in 1906, is a nonprofit outdoor education, conservation, and recreation organization whose mission is "to enrich the community by helping people explore, conserve, learn about and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond." Based in Seattle, Washington, we have over 13,000 members and guests in seven branches throughout Western Washington. We support over 1,500 skilled volunteers who lead 3,200 outdoor education courses and activities on everything from backcountry skiing, wilderness first aid and avalanche safety to conservation education and advocacy. In addition, we provide over 4,000 opportunities for youth to get outside each year. Olympic National Park is an important 'classroom' and recreational area for our members.

Washington Trails Association was founded in 1966 and is the country's largest state-based trail maintenance and hiking advocacy non-profit organization with more than 12,500 members and more than 2.5 million unique annual website visitors. Washington Trails Association's mission is to "preserve, enhance, and promote hiking opportunities in Washington state through collaboration, education, advocacy and volunteer trail maintenance." In 2014, 3,550 individual Washington Trails Association volunteers contributed 120,000 hours of trail maintenance on federal, state and local lands.

We understand that recreation and entrance fees, and an increase in these fees, provide an important source of funds for Mt. Rainier National Park, especially with continual declines in agency funding. We also understand that recreation and entrance fees are important and that at least 80% of these fees go directly to the upkeep of campgrounds, trails, river access points, visitor facilities, and other worthy projects that our members benefit from.

Ideally, we would like to see Congress fund public lands appropriately so that maintenance backlogs can be reduced. In the meantime, we understand the need for increased fees, especially since it has been almost 10 years since any National Park in Washington has increased fees. That said, it is difficult for many recreationists to see fees increased while access, particularly during the winter months, has been

reduced in recent years. While we support an increase in user fees, we believe that this increase in revenue comes with a responsibility to ensure that the needs of all users of the National Park are being considered. Year-round access to the backcountry is particularly important to our members.

While our organizations understand the financial strain and maintenance backlog that your park is facing and support the proposed fee increases, we would be remiss if we did not state a concern that many people may be under similar financial strain and unable to visit Mt. Rainier National Park due to the fee increases.

We recommend developing a program similar to the one that Olympic National Park has implemented with gateway communities to encourage and promote equitable access to the park. The partnership with the North Olympic Library System to create "Explore Olympic!" backpacks that are filled with books, hiking information and a free seven day pass to the park. These backpacks are available for community members as a way to provide more equitable access to the park.

We also believe that the current nine fee-free days that allow free access to all National Parks should be continued. Offering these days is an excellent way to allow and encourage visitors that may otherwise see entrance fees as an obstacle the opportunity to experience and enjoy our national parks.

Some specific aspects of the proposed fee increase that our organizations support are:

- **Improvements in the backcountry reservation system:** A well-functioning online reservation system is important to create simplicity of access for busy lives and the assurance of permits. We encourage the Park to find ways to keep overhead and administrative fees as low as possible with these processes.
- We are pleased to see that the **American the Beautiful pass will remain at \$80/year**, based on federal-level statute.
- In summary, **we support the proposed fee increases the Park has outlined.** While we believe that backcountry fees are necessary to pay for upkeep and maintenance of resources our members enjoy, we encourage the Parks to keep overhead and administration fees as low as possible, balancing increased fees with improved recreational access.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Best,

Thomas O'Keefe  
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American Whitewater

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*Executive Director*  
The Mountaineers

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*Advocacy Director*  
Washington Trails Association