

Trump's federal hiring freeze could have 'disastrous' impact on national parks in summer

BY DANIEL SCHRAGER

It's been a busy couple of weeks for the Oval Office. Since being sworn in as president on Jan. 20, Donald Trump has [signed a slew of executive orders](#) aimed at U.S. participation in the World Health Organization, federal diversity initiatives and transgender members of the military, among others. He nearly instituted a 25% tariff on [goods from Canada and Mexico](#), which is now paused until March, and issued a [since-rescinded](#) freeze on federal grants.

Among the first of his executive actions in his second term was a federal hiring freeze that Trump [issued on his first day in office](#). The order, which lasts for 90 days, states that its goal is to give the Office of Management and Budget, along with Office of Personnel Management and the newly-established Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a chance to come up with a plan to reduce the size of the federal workforce through efficiencies and attrition.

But that could come at the expense of the country's [63 national parks](#), along with the 370



A federal hiring freeze could leave Washington's national parks understaffed this summer.

other lands under the management of the [National Park Service](#), including national monuments and historic sites.

While you might not think of park rangers as federal employees, NPS falls under the [Department of the Interior](#), meaning they're impacted by the order. During the summer, which is typically the busiest time of year for national parks, that could be a problem.

Seasonal staff at WA national parks

Due to the fluctuating nature of park visitation – summer months tend to see [three to four](#)

[times](#) more visitors than the winter – national parks tend to keep a relatively small year-round staff and lean on seasonal staff to get through their busiest months. According to Bill Wade, a former park ranger of 30 years who now serves as the executive director of the [Association of National Park Rangers](#), seasonal workers are a crucial part of park staff.

“Most parks rely very heavily on seasonals during what we refer to as the busy use season,” Wade, who [served as the superintendent](#) of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia for nearly a decade, told McClatchy



The Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center will be just one of the venues where Music in the American Wild will perform free concerts in August.

in a phone interview. “That’s particularly true in the last few years given that the permanent employment workforce has been getting smaller and smaller because of budget limitations.”

That difference is especially stark among Washington’s three national parks: [Mount Rainier](#), [Olympic](#) and [North Cascades](#). In 2023, the three parks saw [929,630 combined visitors](#) in their busiest month, August, compared to just over 88,000 in January.

“In Washington, it certainly is more related to the summer months and maybe even late spring and early fall, so that’s when the majority of the seasonal workforce would be hired,” Wade said.

Wade, who worked at Mount Rainier early in his career as a park ranger, said that while he doesn’t know how much the park currently relies on sea-

sonals, he would estimate that over half of the peak-season employees were seasonals during his time at the park.

Tim McNulty, vice president of Olympic Park Advocates, estimates that Olympic National Park has a similar proportion of seasonal workers.

“As far as visitor services at Olympic, seasonal employees do the bulk of [the] heavy lifting,” McNulty said in an email to McClatchy. “In the past, seasonal employees outnumbered permanent employees at Olympic.”

Seasonal workers take on a variety of roles, both visitor-facing and behind the scenes, according to McNulty and Wade.

“The bulk of services provided to park visitors are provided by seasonal employees,” McNulty said. “They include visitor center information, road and campground maintenance, restrooms, ranger-led in-

terpretive programs, safety patrols – roads and backcountry wilderness – emergency response, resource protection... the list goes on.”

Does parks hiring freeze apply to seasonal employees?

There’s some hope that the hiring freeze might not apply to seasonal workers. The memorandum includes an exception for “non-career employees or officials if approved by agency leadership appointed by the President.”

When asked whether they plan to extend the hiring freeze to seasonal employees at national parks, a Department of the Interior spokesperson told McClatchy in an email that “the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service are implementing President Donald J. Trump’s [Executive Order](#) across the federal civilian workforce.”

According to Wade, early indications are that the order is being applied to seasonal park employees.

“From what I understand, there actually are freezes being carried out on the hiring of seasonals,” Wade said. “In some cases, we’ve heard that seasonals have been offered jobs, and in some cases, even accepted the offers, only to have them rescind it. So right now, it does seem like the employment for seasonals is at a standstill, and who knows when it’s going to be resumed.”

The hiring freeze is set to ex-

pire in mid-to-late April, or whenever OMB submits its federal workforce efficiency plan beforehand. According to Wade, even when the freeze ends, it puts national parks in a difficult position.

“The problem is when and if they do get resumed, the process of bringing people on board and getting them trained, and in some cases, certain jobs require background checks...The longer it takes to get seasonal on board, the longer it’s going to take to get those other functions carried out,” Wade said. “And that’s very much likely to interfere with visitor services and visitor protection activities for this coming summer.”

If it wasn’t for the hiring freeze, Wade said Washington’s parks would be starting to ramp up their seasonal hiring right about now.

“Right now is the time in Washington state, when the parks would begin the hiring process for seasonals that would come on duty for the summer, busy use season,” Wade said.

Can WA national parks function without seasonal workers?

So what would happen if Washington’s national parks aren’t able to bring in seasonal employees in time for the summer? According to Wade, the effects would be seen throughout park operations.

“I think what visitors would see, for example, would be delayed, or in some cases a lack of, effective response to things



like automobile accidents, to search and rescue, incidents in parks,” Wade said. “I think certainly visitor services at visitor centers and the ranger-led programs would be reduced, or in some cases, even completely curtailed. I think visitor centers and other visitor contact stations could see reduced hours, if not reduced days.”

McNulty said that seasonal employees are essential to Olympic’s day-to-day operations and the park would struggle without them.

“If the hiring freeze includes seasonal employees, it would be disastrous for Olympic National Park.”

As a result, parks could become overrun and even see fewer visitors, which McNulty said would have ramifications for the surrounding communities as well.

“In 2023, park visitors spent about \$280 million in communities surrounding Olympic National Park,” McNulty said.

“If Trump and his advisors want to steer a wrecking ball into the peninsula’s tourist economy, they couldn’t have picked a better way to accomplish it.”