

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Increasing Mountaineering Special Use Fees
Park Site: Denali National Park and Preserve
Date: October 28, 2010

Background: Following the disastrous 1992 mountaineering season when 13 climbers lost their lives, the National Park Service was charged by Congress with developing a plan to pro-actively educate climbers on the unique hazards and challenges involved in climbing Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker. A three part strategy was adopted: (1) mandatory 60-day pre-registration (2) enhanced preventative search and rescue education (PSAR), and (3) a special use fee to partially recover the costs of the program.

In 1995, the park began charging a mountaineering special use fee of \$150 for each climber attempting Mount Foraker or Mount McKinley. Fee revenue partially funds the park's ability to place and keep rescue personnel at the 7,200-foot Kahiltna Basecamp, the 14,200-foot Ranger Camp, and the 17,000-foot High Camp throughout the mountaineering season. Park mountain rescue staff cannot respond safely and effectively to SAR and medical emergencies at the elevations encountered on Mount McKinley without spending time at altitude to properly acclimatize. Fee revenue also enabled the park to implement the PSAR program, a human waste removal program and to monitor how and where climbers dispose of their trash. The human waste program and increased NPS presence on the mountain has substantially reduced the amount of solid human waste and trash on Mount McKinley.

A study published in 2008 by the Journal of High Altitude Medicine and Biology concluded that the Denali PSAR program had reduced the fatality rate by 53%.

In 1995 the mountaineering fee recovered almost 30% of the program cost. Despite an increase in the mountaineering fee from \$150 to \$200 in 2005, current fee revenue now covers 17% of the program cost.

Current Status: Approximately 1,000 climbers a year pay the current \$200 Mountain Use Fee. McKinley/Foraker climbers make up less than ½ of 1 percent of all visitors to the park. The average cost to the park of the program for these 1000 visitors is almost \$1,200/person; this does not include search and rescue costs. The average cost to the park for all other park visitors is about \$37/person. In FY-10 the park was able to defray significant costs of the high altitude helicopter contract component of the program by charging \$112,000 to other programs such as the National SAR program. In addition, the park saved \$85,000 by utilizing military aircraft to insert and extract the mountain camps. Such defrayed costs and savings cannot be counted on year to year because of the variability of accidents, availability of the military and variable project funding.

Park Management has met numerous times since 2006 with the American Alpine Club (AAC), the Access Fund, the American Mountain Guides Association, and other interested stakeholders to discuss a possible adjustment in the Mountain Use Fee and the reasons that such an adjustment is necessary. In 2006 the AAC volunteered to pursue funding alternatives to a fee. Neither the NPS nor the interest groups have been successful in securing new funding to offset the cost of the program.

In meetings with these interest groups, the park committed to doing a complete review and analysis of the mountaineering program. Subsequently, every aspect of the program was evaluated for need and cost efficiency. Changes made as a result of this review reduced the cost of the program in FY 10 by approximately \$250,000.

The direct cost of the program in FY-11 is projected to be \$1,160,000. The park has received a total of \$440,000 in base increases to fund the high altitude helicopter program and expects to collect \$200,000 from the cost recovery mountaineering special use fee. This leaves \$520,000 in direct operating costs that must be funded from either other park program funds, an increase in the user fee, or a combination of both.

Proposed actions to offset the cost of the mountaineering program include:

- Require all climbers in Denali National Park and Preserve to pay the Mountain Use Fee
- Increase the Mountain Use Fee to cover more or all of the total cost of the program
- Implement an annual CPI adjustment to the Mountain Use Fee

Position of Interested Parties: The AAC, AMGA, and Access Fund oppose increasing the climbing fee, and believe that such an increase would unduly single out climbers.

Bureau Perspective: An increase in the Mountain Use Fee is essential to paying for services provided by the park to climbers, primarily on Mt. McKinley, in Denali National Park and Preserve. These funds are needed to maintain safety and educational (PSAR) efforts, staff the mountaineering center and mountain camps, provide SAR and medical care, and manage the human waste, and garbage programs.

The increasing costs of the mountaineering program have forced the park to divert funds from other critical park program areas such as wildlife protection (anti-poaching), interpretation, resource management, and maintenance. This is not sustainable.

Park Management has determined that NEPA does not apply to a cost recovery fee adjustment, and accordingly, will not be used for evaluating proposed actions. However, the park is committed to an open and inclusive public involvement process that provides ample opportunity for meaningful dialog, feedback and suggestions towards thoughtfully considered agency decisions.

Contact: Paul Anderson, Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve, (907) 683-9581, or Paul_R_Anderson@nps.gov.

See also the Report to Congress: "Analysis of Cost Recovery for High-Altitude Rescues on Mt. McKinley, Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska" (August 2001).