



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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Washington, DC 20240

DIRECTOR'S ORDER #2: PARK PLANNING

Approved:

Counselor to the Secretary
Exercising the Delegated Authority of the Director

Effective Date:

1-11-21

Duration: Until amended or rescinded

This Director's Order supplements NPS *Management Policies* (2006), chapter 2, "Park System Planning," and supersedes sections 2.2 through 2.3.1.2, and sections 2.3.1.7, 2.3.1.12, 2.3.2, and 2.3.4. The rest of chapter 2 of *Management Policies* remains in effect.

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1. Background and Purpose

The National Park Service (NPS) park planning program has transitioned from preparing traditional stand-alone general management plans to a more responsive and flexible planning framework to meet park planning needs and fulfill legal and policy requirements. This Director's Order (Order) clarifies that a park's planning portfolio—the totality of planning documents in use at a given park—fulfills a park's planning needs, including meeting the requirements for a general management plan (GMP).

This Order:

- defines the NPS planning framework and the park planning portfolio;
- outlines the types of planning documents available to meet park planning needs; and
- provides clarity and guidance about how a park's planning portfolio meets the statutory requirements for GMPs ([54 USC 100502](#)).

Additional guidance will be provided through the accompanying Reference Manual (RM-2).

2. Authorities

Authority to issue this Director’s Order is contained in the National Park Service Organic Act ([54 USC 100101\(a\)](#) *et seq.*) and other NPS laws, and the delegations of authority contained in [Part 245](#) of the Department of the Interior Manual.

This Director’s Order is intended only to improve the internal management of the NPS, and is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its departments, agencies, instrumentalities or entities, its officers or employees, or any other person.

This Order lacks the force and effect of law. Moreover, as it is (1) directed only to the NPS, and (2) not intended to have any effect on any regulated parties, it is not a “guidance document” within the meaning of Executive Order 13891 (2019). See, section 2(b)(v) of the [Executive Order](#).

3. Major Elements of the Park Planning Framework

The NPS park planning framework is based on the following principles:

- Planning requires collaboration between parks, regional offices, and national planning offices as well as other interdisciplinary programs across the NPS.
- A park’s planning portfolio provides a responsive and flexible approach to meet park planning needs and to fulfill legal and policy requirements, including statutory requirements for GMPs.
- Monitoring and data analysis are necessary to ensure that a park’s planning portfolio meets park needs.

Central to the planning framework is the park planning portfolio—the assemblage of planning documents that guide park management and decision making and satisfy law and policy. A park’s planning portfolio, which extends from the foundation document to site-specific resource and visitor use management plans, creates a logical, trackable guide for future park management actions.

The park planning portfolio can be visualized as a loose-leaf binder, to which park planning elements, such as a foundation document, stand-alone GMP, strategic plans, and implementation plans, may be added or updated so the portfolio remains current. By using the totality of documents within a park’s planning portfolio, park managers are able to fulfill all relevant legal and policy requirements, including GMP statutory requirements. Unless otherwise specified, the term “general management plan” refers to (1) a stand-alone GMP, or (2) the planning documents in a park’s planning portfolio that collectively meet the statutory requirements for a GMP. Specific elements that may be included in a planning portfolio are discussed in greater detail below and in RM-2.

3.1 Foundation Documents

Every park must have a foundation document—a formal statement of its core mission that provides basic guidance for planning and management decisions. The foundation document is guided by the enabling legislation for a park, other laws, and NPS policies. It identifies the park’s purpose, significance, interpretive themes, fundamental resources and values, and, if

applicable, other important resources and values, special mandates, and administrative commitments.

The foundation document also includes an assessment of park planning and data needs. The assessment is a prioritized list of planning projects and data needed to address key park issues. It is intended to guide future planning activities and associated studies in parks and should be updated as necessary.

3.2 Comprehensive Plans

Comprehensive plans provide overall direction and guidance on a variety of issues and topics in one document. These plans can be undertaken on a park-wide scale or can be focused on a distinct area of a park, such as a sub-unit (in a park with multiple units) or a district.

Congress has mandated several types of comprehensive plans, including:

- GMPs for parks;
- comprehensive management plans for national trails; and
- comprehensive river management plans for national wild and scenic rivers.

The requirements for these plans vary depending on applicable laws and policies. Comprehensive plans for NPS-administered components of the National Trails System must meet the statutory requirements found in [16 USC 1244\(e\) and \(f\)](#) and NPS policy in [Director's Order #45: National Trails System](#). Comprehensive river management plans for NPS-administered components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System must meet the statutory requirements of [16 USC 1274\(d\)\(1\)](#) and NPS policy in [Director's Order #46: Wild and Scenic Rivers](#). Wilderness stewardship plans are another type of comprehensive plan, which NPS policy ([Management Policies](#) (2006), chapter 6, and [Director's Order #41: Wilderness Stewardship](#)) mandates be prepared for all wilderness areas.

3.2.1 General Management Plan Requirements

A GMP provides broad direction for park management. At a minimum, each park must have a plan or series of plans that satisfy the four statutory requirements identified in [54 USC 100502](#), which states that GMPs shall include:

1. measures for the preservation of the area's resources;
2. indications of types and general intensities of development (including visitor circulation and transportation patterns, systems, and modes) associated with public enjoyment and use of the area, including general locations, timing of implementation, and anticipated costs;
3. identification of and implementation commitments for visitor carrying capacities for all areas of the park; and
4. indications of potential modifications to the external boundaries of the park, and the reasons for the modifications.

If a park's planning portfolio contains documents that address these four elements, it will be deemed to meet the requirements for a GMP per 54 USC 100502. A park's foundation document serves as the basis for general management planning; a foundation document includes an assessment of planning and data needs, which helps park managers identify future planning efforts that address GMP requirements.

As stated above, the term “general management plan” refers to (1) a stand-alone GMP, or (2) the planning documents in a park’s planning portfolio that collectively meet the statutory requirements for a GMP. The following subsections (3.2.1.1–3.2.1.4) describe how the four statutory GMP requirements can be met through the planning portfolio.

3.2.1.1 Measures for the Preservation of Park Resources

A GMP identifies measures needed to preserve a park’s fundamental resources and values and other selected resources. Direction for the preservation of park resources that assist park managers in meeting this requirement may be found in:

- the assessment of planning and data needs in the park’s foundation document;
- a resource stewardship strategy or other planning document that identifies resource goals and management activities; and
- implementation plans or treatment documents for specific resource management topics (for example, a wildlife management plan, vegetation management plan, historic structure report, or cultural landscape report).

3.2.1.2 Types and General Intensities of Development

The planning framework gives the NPS flexibility to select the planning tool that best suits a park’s needs to meet this requirement. Some parks may need a stand-alone GMP to take a comprehensive look at development needs. Other parks may need implementation plans with site-specific development details. Examples of implementation plans that accomplish this include:

- development concept plans and site plans
- zoning plans
- transportation plans
- visitor use management plans
- trail management plans

Facility-related planning documents should create a realistic vision for the future and set a direction that considers the environmental and financial sustainability of proposed facilities and operational programs.

3.2.1.3 Visitor Capacity

Visitor capacity—also known as visitor carrying capacity and user capacity—is a component of visitor use management. It identifies the maximum levels and types of visitor use that an area can accommodate, while achieving and maintaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences that are consistent with park purposes.

Given their general nature, stand-alone GMPs or other comprehensive plans initially address the requirement to identify visitor capacities by assessing current levels of visitor use and baseline conditions for resources and visitor experiences. They typically include qualitative statements about the types and levels of visitor use that a park could accommodate, while achieving and maintaining desired resource conditions consistent with park purposes.

The identification of and implementation commitments for visitor capacity will be addressed as part of a park’s planning portfolio. For parks that do not identify visitor capacity and implementation commitments in a stand-alone GMP, these requirements will be met through plans that have a significant focus on visitor use (for example, a visitor use management plan,

wilderness stewardship plan, comprehensive site or area plan, or trail management plan). The more detailed direction on visitor capacity in implementation plans should be consistent with the general guidance for the types and levels of visitor use in the GMP or other completed plans in a park's planning portfolio; or, if necessary, it may update or amend a stand-alone GMP or other plans.

3.2.1.4 Boundary Modifications

Park managers must consider the need for potential modifications to a park's external boundaries. If a boundary change is needed, it should be evaluated in a stand-alone GMP or another planning portfolio document (such as a boundary adjustment study).

3.2.1.5 Timely Review of General Management Plans

A GMP will be reviewed every 10 to 15 years, or as necessary, to ensure the four statutory requirements are up to date. This review will result in written documentation of the existing planning documents that contribute to meeting the four statutory requirements and will identify park planning priorities that further contribute to meeting the requirements.

In addition to the 10- to 15-year review, the NPS should amend a park GMP when:

- significant changes to the conditions discussed in an existing GMP have occurred; or
- substantial new issues related to any of the four statutory requirements have arisen.

If the NPS determines a new planning document related to the GMP statutory requirements should be completed, a strategy to complete the plan should be prepared and the plan should be started as soon as funding becomes available. The guidance in a park's existing planning portfolio will remain in effect until the new planning document(s) has been completed.

3.3 Strategic Plans

In this Order, strategic plans are broadly defined as programmatic level planning documents that identify goals and priorities. Strategic plans are designed to help NPS managers establish a clear direction for their park or program by helping answer five general questions: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? What are the most important things we need to accomplish to get there? What are our constraints and opportunities? How will we review our progress?

Examples of strategic plans include:

- resource stewardship strategies
- strategic facility investment plans
- commercial services strategies
- business plans
- long-range interpretive plans

3.4 Implementation Plans

Implementation plans typically tier off comprehensive plans and focus on how to implement an activity or project needed to achieve a long-term goal, address a management issue, or achieve a desired condition or goal. Implementation plans may direct a specific project or an ongoing activity. These plans usually require a level of detail and analysis that goes well beyond what is appropriate for a comprehensive or strategic plan. Examples of implementation plans include:

- visitor use management plans
- development concept plans and site plans

- commercial services plans
- resource-specific management plans

3.5 Environmental Analysis and Consultation Requirements

Planning documents referenced in this Order will comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), other required consultation (for example, tribal consultation), and associated regulations, as appropriate. (See also [Director’s Order #12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-Making](#), the accompanying [NEPA Handbook](#), and the [NPS NHPA Section 106 Nationwide Programmatic Agreement](#).)

3.6 Civic Engagement and Public Involvement

Understanding and considering the public’s interest will inform and strengthen the entire planning portfolio. The planning process referenced in this Order will comply with the requirements and intent of *Management Policies*, sections 2.1.3 and 2.3.1.5; and [Director’s Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement](#). Public involvement strategies, practices, and activities will be developed and conducted within the framework of civic engagement.

3.7 Consistency with Other Federal Agencies, and Tribal, State, and Local Governments

Documents within a park’s planning portfolio provide consistent guidance that takes into account NPS laws, regulations, and policies, as well as relevant policies, plans, and programs of other Federal agencies, and Tribal, State, or local governments. When there are inconsistencies between park planning documents and the plans of other Federal agencies or Tribal, State, or local governments, NPS managers should work with the appropriate entities to resolve those inconsistencies to the greatest degree possible consistent with applicable authorities.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 Associate and Assistant Directors

4.1.1 Associate Director, Park Planning, Facilities and Lands

The Associate Director of Park Planning, Facilities and Lands (Associate Director) is delegated the authority to implement and oversee this Order and will:

- establish, in consultation with the Deputy Director, Operations, and regional directors, a process for approving public release of plans funded by the Park Planning and Special Studies Division;
- establish and implement the policies, procedures, and standards specified in this Order;
- issue, review, and revise as appropriate, RM-2 with detailed guidance, general information, recommendations, procedures, and examples for developing foundation documents, comprehensive plans, strategic plans, and implementation plans; and
- provide the necessary guidance, advice, and consultation to ensure the proper and effective implementation of this Order.

The Associate Director may delegate these authorities as deemed appropriate.

4.1.2 Other Associate and Assistant Directors

Other associate and assistant directors may have responsibilities for particular plans, such as involvement in planning document input, development, and reviews.

4.2 Park Planning and Special Studies Division

The Park Planning and Special Studies Division, Washington Support Office (WASO), will:

- provide overall direction, funding, and policy development for the park planning program;
- conduct WASO-level review of planning documents and review selected plans for national policy consistency; and
- develop training opportunities to improve Service-wide understanding of the planning framework, park planning portfolio, best practices for planning, and support tools for planning.

4.3 Planning Leadership Group

The Planning Leadership Group is composed of the chief of the Park Planning and Special Studies Division, regional planning chiefs, the manager of the Environmental Planning and Compliance Branch of the Environmental Quality Division, the chief and branch chiefs of the Denver Service Center Planning Division, and representatives from several NPS programs. Its function is to:

- provide Service-wide leadership and guidance for the park planning program; and
- help ensure consistency in planning throughout the NPS.

4.4 Denver Service Center Planning Division

The Denver Service Center Planning Division will prepare planning products and provide technical support and consulting services on projects for parks, regions, programs, and the Park Planning and Special Studies Division.

4.5 WASO Program Managers

WASO program managers will:

- formulate and advise on NPS park planning policies and related guidance;
- manage Service-wide program funds to support the planning and information needs of parks in ways that provide the most benefit for the National Park System; and
- review planning documents as requested by the Park Planning and Special Studies Division.

4.6 Regional Directors

Regional directors will:

- review and approve planning documents, as appropriate; and
- establish regional planning priorities based on park and regional planning program recommendations.

4.7 Regional Planning Offices

Regional planning offices, including the regional chiefs of planning, regional planning portfolio managers, and other planning staff, will:

- produce and coordinate the development of planning documents;
- collaborate with each park in the region to maintain park planning portfolios;
- review all park planning portfolio documents, particularly those intended to meet GMP statutory requirements, ensuring consistency with this Order and RM-2;
- help park staff identify planning and data needs and submit projects for available fund sources;
- propose regional planning priorities based on the parks' assessments of planning needs;
- coordinate with regional and national compliance programs (NEPA, NHPA, other required consultation), as appropriate;
- ensure that regional associate and assistant directors are consulted in the preparation of park foundation documents, GMPs, and comprehensive, strategic, and implementation plans;
- maintain relationships with park managers and staff; and
- liaise with the Park Planning and Special Studies Division, Denver Service Center Planning Division, and other regional programs.

4.8 Park Superintendents

Superintendents will:

- oversee the park planning portfolio and monitor satisfaction of GMP statutory requirements;
- ensure staff commitment to participate in planning activities;
- collaborate with the regional planning offices to identify planning and data needs, prioritize planning work, and secure funding for planning projects;
- encourage partners to support and participate in planning activities where applicable;
- keep apprised of—and work to resolve any inconsistencies with—other Federal, State, local, and tribal government policies, plans, and programs;
- fulfill compliance responsibilities related to NEPA (see Director's Order #12), NHPA, (see the 2008 NPS NHPA Section 106 Nationwide Programmatic Agreement), and other environmental compliance requirements; and
- fulfill responsibilities for civic engagement and public involvement, in accordance with Director's Order #75A.

4.9 Project Accountability

Park superintendents, project managers, and regional directors are responsible and accountable for accomplishing planning projects and ensuring projects are consistent with all legal mandates, Executive Orders, regulations, NPS policies, accepted preservation standards and practices, Service-wide orders, directives, initiatives and priorities, and Departmental guidance.

5. Additional Sources of Guidance

Additional sources of guidance are:

1. Section 604 of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 (54 USC 100502; [Public Law 95-625](#))
2. National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended ([16 USC 1241—1251](#))
3. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, as amended ([16 USC 1271—1287](#))
4. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), as amended ([54 USC 300101 et seq.](#))
5. [NPS NHPA Section 106 Nationwide Programmatic Agreement](#), 2008, and [NHPA Section 106 Toolkit](#), 2016
6. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([42 USC 4321—4370d](#))
7. Director's Order #12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-Making and National Park Service NEPA Handbook (2015)
8. Director's Order #41: Wilderness Stewardship and [Reference Manual 41: Wilderness Stewardship](#)
9. [Visitor Capacity on Federally Managed Lands and Waters: A Position Paper to Guide Policy](#) and supporting digital guidance documents (Interagency Visitor Use Management Council, <https://visitorusemanagement.nps.gov>)
10. Director's Order #45: National Trails System
11. Director's Order #46: Wild and Scenic Rivers and Reference Manual 46
12. Director's Order #48A: Concession Management
13. Director's Order #75A: Civic Engagement and Public Involvement

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