

Rule Change Would Permit Weapons in National Parks



Anne Sherwood for The New York Times

Supporters of a plan to allow concealed weapons in parks say it would make people feel safe. But critics see danger to animals like bison in Yellowstone.

May 30, 2008

Rule Change Would Permit Weapons in National Parks

By [JIM ROBBINS](#)

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. — The federal government is considering a proposal to allow visitors to carry loaded, concealed weapons in some national parks, wildlife refuges and monuments.

The [National Rifle Association](#) favors the proposed rule, arguing that it would help keep crime down and protect visitors from potentially dangerous wildlife.

“You read stories about people attacked by animals or who stumble upon meth labs or women who are raped in a national park,” the N.R.A.’s chief lobbyist, Chris W. Cox, said. “We don’t believe law-abiding citizens should be kept from protecting themselves and their families in national wildlife refuges or in national parks.”

But opponents, including several former [National Park Service](#) officials, say that the current rules are effective — there is little crime in national parks — and that the change would threaten visitors’ safety and could easily ruin the family-friendly atmosphere of the parks and other attractions.

People traveling in national parks and wildlife refuges are required to keep weapons “inoperable or packed, cased or stored in a manner that will prevent their ready use.” Someone carrying a loaded gun is subject to a citation and a fine of up to \$150.

“A gun will give people a false sense of security that they can approach a bear or a bison,” said Doug Morris, a member of the executive council of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees and a former chief ranger and superintendent at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California. “A person with a gun will pull out that weapon and fire away if they feel threatened, even if that fear is illogical.”

Mr. Morris called the proposal “an appalling pander to a powerful special interest group, the N.R.A.”

The [Department of the Interior](#), which oversees national parks and wildlife refuges, will decide whether to adopt the proposed rule after a public comment period that lasts through June, an Interior Department spokesman, Chris Paolino, said.

Interior Secretary [Dirk Kempthorne](#) proposed the rule in response to letters from 51 United States senators — 42 Republicans and 9 Democrats — who asked that the current rule be changed. The current rule, the senators said, infringes on gun owners’ rights, and the change would help make gun restrictions more consistent.

Interior officials say the new rule is an effort to modernize one that was established to prevent poaching. That rule was last changed in 1982 when six states had “right-to-carry” laws that allow residents with permits to carry concealed weapons. Forty-eight states now have such laws.

The new rule would apply the weapons laws of states bordering a park or refuge. Gun owners would be allowed to carry concealed weapons in national parks and monuments in states where they may carry such weapons in state parks and state wildlife refuges. Twenty-four states have such laws.

“It’s an effort to recognize the concept of concealed carry and to be able to defer to states and state authority,” Mr. Paolino said.

State gun laws govern both of the other large federal landlords, the [United States Forest Service](#) and the [Bureau of Land Management](#), he said.

But in the case of a large national park like Yellowstone that is bordered by three states, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, it was not clear which state’s laws would apply.

“We have these boundary issues,” a spokesman for the park, Al Nash, said. “Which state’s regulations would law enforcement officials be asked to support? That could make this challenging.”

The deputy chief ranger of Yellowstone, Tim Reid, said he did not know what to expect if the rule was approved. “My mental eight ball says, ‘It is too soon to tell, try again later,’ ” Mr. Reid said.

Seven former National Park Service directors have written a letter saying the new rule addresses a nonexistent problem. “There is no evidence,” the letter states, “that any potential problems that one can imagine arising from the existing regulations might overwhelm the good they are known to do.”

Critics also say that the new rule could cause someone carrying a pistol into a visitor center at a national park to violate the ban on weapons in federal buildings. Such situations, they say, might necessitate the installation of costly

and intrusive metal detectors. Also, they said, no study has been done of the law's potential environmental impact, as is required under federal law.

But Mr. Paolino said education was the answer to many problems the critics raise. "Visitors will need to know the rules," he said.

Among fans of the proposed rule was Steve Klein of Fort Worth, Tex., who was camped near Yellowstone's park headquarters near Mammoth. "I think it's a good idea," Mr. Klein said. "If everybody has it you don't worry about protecting yourself. I'm not worried about the wildlife though, that's not the reason."

Another visitor, Curtis Bergquist, a recent college graduate from Portland, Ore., was concerned about the rule's potential effect on animals. "It's a bad idea," Mr. Bergquist said. "It's more tempting to use it if you have it, on wildlife. They'll think they're far enough away no one will hear it and they can get away with it."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/30/us/30guns.html>