

*Item available for public inspection in the Clerk's office during regular business hours (Monday - Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM)*

**April 8, 2025**

**Regular  
Meeting**

**Liz Grans - Department Update: Email to Board of Supervisors**

**Subject:** Letter to Secretary Burgum via Congressman McClintock

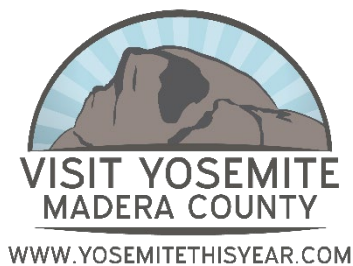
**[EXTERNAL EMAIL]**

Hello,

Congressman McClintock met Tuesday with Secretary Burgum regarding Yosemite's VAMP and the press release that was put on hold last week. NPS was announcing a Summer 2025 Peak Hours Reservation system that was very similar to last year's reservation system. The Congressman was able to at least plead our case to Secretary Burgum on the economic impacts of another system at this late date, and the visitor impacts that this system would and has caused. The Secretary asked Congressman McClintock to get a letter from the gateway group explaining the impacts and giving our suggestions for changes and improvements. We had 24 hours to do this, so we basically compiled all the letters from the past along with some new economic stats and sent that letter off last night, see attached.

Keeping our fingers & toes crossed that we get a favorable decision very soon! Will keep everyone posted as we hear anything.

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Yosemite Visitor Access Management Review & Recommendations  
from the Yosemite Gateway Tourism Bureaus  
Visit Tuolumne County, Visit Yosemite | Madera County,  
Yosemite/Mariposa County Tourism Bureau & Mono County Tourism  
April 2, 2025

1. **2025 Season Recommendation:**

Key is announcing a plan immediately

- The series of events regarding staffing and reservations system uncertainty this year to date have caused fear and confusion among aspiring Yosemite visitors, scaring them away and dramatically reducing planned peak season visitation.
- The situation is dire, as gateway lodges are seeing July bookings down almost 50%. February & March are the peak booking months for summer, so visitation will inevitably be down this summer in Yosemite, since many have already made plans to go elsewhere.
- International booking agents have confirmed they are not recommending anyone go to Yosemite because they can't do so just to have their visitors turned away at the gate. They are sending international visitors to other locations instead.
- Previous reservations systems have crushed local economies – see Mariposa County statistics at end of document.

**OPTIONS**

1) Announce No Reservations for 2025 season -- RECOMMENDED

- We are too late in the season already, and announcing reservations at this late date will cause chaos for the many who have already made plans to visit and may either not hear about the reservations need, not hear in time to get a reservation or not be able to get a reservation and have to cancel their visit.
- Announcing a system will also create an unnecessary barrier for others to visit the Park, and with planned visitation already down so dramatically and the peak booking windows behind us, over-crowding will not be an issue this year except perhaps on a handful of absolutely peak days.
- NPS also completed a series of Yosemite Valley traffic flow and parking improvements in 2024 and has never had a summer without reservations in place to see how those improvements help the visitor experience. This summer is the opportunity to do so

2) If needed, announce a compromise minimal Pilot Reservation System for 2025 season

- Reservations required on summer Saturdays June through August and on holiday weekends (Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day)
- Reservation times: 6 am to 2 pm (try 2pm rather than 3pm to see what is learned)
- Release 5,000 daily reservations right away, 1,500 daily reservations 7 days out, 1,000 daily reservations 2 days out

Also grant Direct Hiring Authority to NPS and issue a press release from NPS assuring the public that NPS has the authority and ability now to successfully staff for the coming season

## 2. Why is a Permanent Yosemite Reservation Program Being Pushed by NPS

### ORIGINS

- No reservation system existed for the first 130 years of Yosemite's existence as a National Park.
- Reservation system was first tried during Covid in 2020 when visitation was limited due to social distancing requirements and the Park could not be adequately staffed.
- System was continued in 2021 when COVID constraints and NPS staffing shortages continued.
- System was continued in 2022 with the rationale of construction of improvements in the Valley limiting capacity.
- There was no system in 2023 but a system was reintroduced in 2024.

### SHIFT TO MAKE PERMANENT

Yosemite NPS leadership has used the reservations system Covid origins to try to create a permanent system because it served the NPS well to limit Park visitation. Rather than returning to past successful practices, seeing how Valley traffic & parking improvements helped congestion, and enhancing its entry gate and other operations, it chose to limit public access.

NPS then asked those who got tickets if they enjoyed their less crowded experience, rather than asking the many frustrated, disappointed aspiring visitors who were turned away at the gates or didn't even try to visit.

### IS A PERMANENT SYSTEM NEEDED?

Visitation statistics from NPS monthly Yosemite visitation data show that, while visitation spiked during the NPS anniversary period, current visitation is little changed from the past:

#### Yosemite Visitation (June - August)

- Pre-covid 20 years average (2000-2019) = 1.68M
- 2023 with no reservations system = 1.67M
- 2024 with reservations system = 1.69M\*

*\* Little change in visitation but huge change in who visited, as reservations limit foreign and broad domestic multi-day visitation while favoring local day trip visitation, which is much less helpful for local economies and hurts broader tourism revenues*

#### Yosemite Visitation — July, busiest month of year

- 1993, 30 years ago = 604K
- 2023, with no reservations system = 580K

NPS systems and ability to handle visitation should have increased significantly over time as well, making it easier to manage visitor flow.

## 3. System Tested to Date & Impacts

NPS has continued to repeatedly test variation on the same system over and over again rather than test other innovative, lower impact solutions – a summary of past variations by year is provided at the end of this document.

On Yosemite's busiest days, when morning and early afternoon congestion in East Yosemite Valley is a problem, most of the Park remains uncrowded.

Yet rather than design a targeted system to address the primary congestion area while enabling visitation to other Park destinations, the current system locks the public out of the entire Park from early morning until late afternoon. In addition, the system chosen locks the gates every day for months at a time, rather than focusing on the particular days and times of day when congestion is an issue. This is a terrible injustice to the public and creates significant consequences, including:

- Denies the public access to all of Yosemite, not just the East Valley
- Disenfranchises populations with limited technology access and expertise to obtain reservations
- Doesn't align with trip planning timelines and needs for international and out of state visitors, who plan trips up to a year in advance and won't book without a guarantee of Park access
- Unfairly advantages in-park lodging guests, who are guaranteed Park access without a ticket
- Unfairly advantages Aramark (Park concessionaire) as their guests are guaranteed Park access
- Significantly impacts gateway lodging, businesses and communities and meaningfully reduces county tax revenues
- Is rigid and cannot dynamically adapt well to real time events

Other solutions that better target congested areas during busy days and busy times of day without the significant problems of the previously tested system exist and must be tested and refined to better address congestion and protection of Park resources while maximizing public access and minimizing unintended consequences.

NPS should never consider trying to impose a permanent reservations system without doing so.

#### **4. 2026 – Test East Valley Morning Pass System**

Given that the core problem is crowding in the East Valley, access management in Yosemite should focus on the East Valley and not restrict access to the entire Park.

This root problem is best solved by controlling congestion and crowds on busy days in the East Valley with a targeted, dynamic system that addresses key problem areas and times, and which can be adjusted real-time, rather than an inflexible system that limits access to all of Yosemite months in advance.

There are variations on the system proposed below that could include pre-sale of tickets, but the following is an elegant approach that entirely eliminates the complexity of pre-sold reservations.

- Have a specific number of East Valley Morning Passes handed out by gate agents at entry gates on a first-come-first-served basis throughout the morning. Those arriving after passes run out are told they can enter the Valley after 1 (or noon or 2pm) and are given a map of other areas of the Park to enjoy in the meantime (see Destinations Outside the Valley section below).
- Entry time for those without morning entry passes may vary based on anticipated visitation pressure of the given day (weekend/weekday/holiday, or peak summer vs summer shoulders), giving flexibility to best serve both NPS needs and those of the public. System uses a common counter system for all gates to count morning passes handed out. A ranger or volunteer stationed in the entry line could provide these passes to enhance gate throughput.

- El Capitan Crossover/Shunt near entrance to East Valley is designed to redirect traffic away from the Valley during particularly busy periods, and has been in place since 2013. Ranger(s) would be stationed here in morning hours to check if arriving visitors have East Valley Morning Passes. Those who do are waived through. Those without Morning Passes who didn't heed the direction not to go the Valley until the designated time are directed away from the Valley via the El Capitan crossover and directed to enjoy visiting lesser known attractions throughout the Park until the morning pass entry period is over (see Destinations Outside the Valley section below).
- If pilot test is successful, could enhance El Cap crossover area checkpoint and extend check-point to the west to maximize Park Ranger efficiency to minimize back-ups at check-point during peak times.

The many benefits of the East Valley Morning Pass approach versus the 'lock the entire Park' approach tested to date include:

- a. Does not deny the public access to Yosemite
- b. Alleviates NPS gate agent stress of having to deny entry to visitors
- c. Does not disenfranchise disadvantaged populations
- d. Does not deter international and out of state visitors
- e. Does not unfairly advantage in-park lodging guests
- f. Does not cause significant peak season economic losses to gateway lodges and county tax revenues
- g. Squarely aligns with the goals of the Merced River Plan to limit peak visitation in East Yosemite Valley, as opposed to the entire Park (and to use the El Cap Traffic Diversion to divert traffic)
- h. Gives Yosemite visitors clear incentive to explore other areas of the Park along with guidance in doing so (see below)
- i. Spreads visitors throughout the Park and throughout the day, alleviating East Valley parking, road and trail congestion
- j. Does not require complicated, discriminating, costly online advance reservation system
- k. Avoids problems of hoarding and of unused entry tickets
- l. Creates natural incentive to avoid busiest days for visitors with flexibility
- m. Can provide real-time 'Morning Passes Remaining' information to help visitor decision-making and minimize gate lines (e.g., encourages potential late morning arrivers to arrive later and enjoy options outside the Park, or to plan non-Valley visit options)
- n. Eliminates the impact of and the need to manage 'pass-through visitors' transiting the Park via Hwy 120
- o. Allows people who don't need to be in the Valley early to self-select and come later
- p. Puts pass control and distribution at entry gates where staffing resources & infrastructure already exist
- q. Is dynamic, not rigid, and allows NPS to adjust system real-time for specific events that might alter peak season visitation in the short term (e.g. small fires outside of Yosemite)

Valley in summer 2022 that caused huge lodging cancellations yet left no entry tickets available for visitors seeking access post-fire)

- r. Allows NPS to real-time test and fine tune number of Morning Passes given, days needed, and exact timing needed

After much advocacy from us and others, NPS did consider such a system in their permanent VAMP proposal as one of the options. Yet in doing so, they imposed onerous and unnecessarily burdensome elements on this option (including advance reservations, tickets required until 6pm, constructing new check/turnaround facilities in the Valley rather than using existing turnaround...). NPS then rejected it out of hand, recommending the only solution they have ever tested, having never tested the morning pass concept nor allowed refinement of their heavy-handed proposed design for it before dismissing it.

## **5. Destinations Outside the East Valley**

Most Yosemite visitors head straight to the Valley because they aren't aware of the many other wonderful options throughout the rest of the Park. In conjunction with the Morning Pass system, it is key to educate guests about other places to go and to provide them materials to help them explore areas outside Yosemite Valley.

In originally describing the Morning Pass vision, we included an example list of 35+ existing Destinations Outside the Valley and an associated map of those uncrowded, special places to visit beyond the Valley.

The primary additions needed to enable visitors to enjoy these places are just excellent roadside signage announcing each attraction, and a 'Destinations outside the East Valley' map identifying and highlighting each option.

The map could be passed out at the gateway entrances, visitor centers and hotels surrounding the Park. The map could over time have an interactive digital version and/or be given out by QR Code at entry gates.

We also outlined modest improvements (not requiring NEPA) that NPS could make over time, such as improved parking, signage and trail maintenance, to enhance access and enjoyment of these destinations. For most destinations, these improvements are not required for immediate visitor use and can be rolled out over a number of years.

Since NPS has not followed up on the idea of proactively promoting non-Valley destinations to take pressure off the Valley, we have taken it on ourselves to create a Destinations Outside the Valley map for use by NPS and gateway communities. Attached is an early draft of this map, which we intend to produce and roll out this summer. We would welcome NPS involvement in refining and rolling out this tool, as it will serve all parties well.

## **6. Improvements Needed for Success Now & in the Future:**

- Partner with the Gateway tourism bureaus and lodging providers and let us be sounding boards and thought partners in system design
  - We are in touch with guests every day and can help create the best system for all parties
  - We are the key to communication with the guests and can help alleviate back up at the gates thru our visitor centers

- We are on the ground and hearing firsthand the problems
- We want visitors to have a good time, local business to thrive, and Yosemite to be protected for all time. Not to mention, we have great ideas!
- Enhance Regular Park Entry Pass System & Entry Gate Efficiency
  - Sell Park Entry Passes at the visitor centers – for many years we had a Park Ranger that could sell passes at the Visitor Centers and answer questions before visitors got to the limited gates.
  - Add QR codes, Starlink internet with wi-fi, express lanes and other efficiency enabling technology (e.g., license plate readers?) at entry gates to increase throughput and reduce back-ups
  - Expand gate staffing, and consider rangers and/or volunteers (which we have offered) to walk lines and help with entry gate efficiency on busy days
  - Have rangers at entry gates direct visitors with questions to information centers inside the gates to keep entry gate lines moving
  - There is absolutely no reason a visitor should sit for 2 or 3 hours in line ever, and the problem is due to inefficiency and poor system design, which reflects very poorly on our National Park System
- Open up the Badger Pass parking area and run shuttles on weekends or daily during summer to Glacier Point (another crowded area at times) and into the Valley
- NPS Staff Hiring – develop expedited hiring process for seasonal staff. Why does it take 6 months to rehire a seasonal employee (or any employee for that matter) that has been working for the Park for years?
- NPS Employee Housing – lack of employees has been an excuse or cause for not being efficient for many years. Are employee housing occupancies back to pre-Covid numbers (e.g., two employees per bedroom as was the standard for years)? The Park is saying that the recently vacated Crane Flat facility that housed around 60 Nature Bridge students is going to be restored to a meadow. Why not invest a bit and use that for additional NPS Employee Housing that is so needed in the Park.
- Address pass thru access for visitors transiting the Park, as an estimated 40% of the visitors go in one gate and out another. (percentage quoted from a study done in the 1990's). The currently tested reservations system creates a nightmare for pass through visitors, whereas no reservation system or an East Valley Morning Pass system eliminates the problem.

**See Attachment: Destinations Outside the Valley Map**



## REFERENCE ITEMS

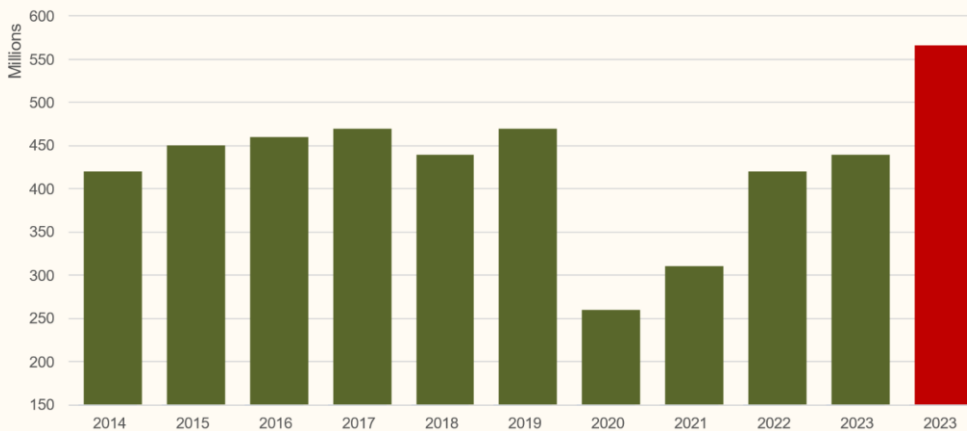
### Mariposa County example of the impact from Yosemite reservations

This slide illustrates the revenue trend, the decline caused by COVID-19, and the current recovery. All these numbers are coming from Visit California and the Office of Economics/GoBiz.

The Red column shows what the recovery should be based on actual California inflation and consumer spending. This lack of growth is attributed primarily to the years of reservation systems. Also, a slower recovery of international inbound travel.

The impacts of these restrictive measures by the YNP reservation system have been significant. 50% of Mariposa County jobs are based on tourism, our single economic driver. Tourism taxes account for 58% of the county's discretionary general fund. Tourism pays for our police & fire protection, roads, and services.

### Annual Visitor Spend in Mariposa County



When adjusting for inflation, \$464 million in 2019 would be \$566 million in 2023.

## History of Yosemite Reservation Pilot Programs

A series of repeated variations of the same basic system, without trying a different approach with potentially fewer and less severe unintended consequences...

- 2020 – Covid
  - 24-hour reservations
  - 7 day passes
  - June 15 thru October 31
  - Estimated 3,600 passes per day
- 2021 – Covid continued
  - 24-hour reservations,
  - 3 day passes
  - May 21 thru September 30
  - Estimated 2,600 passes per day
- 2022 – Construction in the Park including new roadway system in the Valley, Bridalveil Fall, Tuolumne Meadows....
  - Peak Hours 6 am to 4 pm daily
  - May 20 thru September 30
  - Estimated 2,600 passes per days
- 2023 – No Reservations – record snow year causing Tioga not to open until July, Mariposa Grove was closed, Glacier Point was closed, basically sending everyone to Yosemite Valley
- 2024 – Peak Hours PLUS Reservations – very confusing to visitors, so restrictive that the Park said that they were turning around 700 cars a day at the gates while parking lots in Yosemite Valley were half full
  - Peak Hours Plus 5 am to 4 pm
  - Saturday & Sundays April 13<sup>th</sup> thru June 30<sup>th</sup> plus holidays
  - 7 days a week July 1 through August 16 – ended about a week early as they were not needed daily
  - Saturday & Sundays August 17 thru October 27 plus holidays
  - Estimated daily passes 2,880 spring weekends, 5,170 Summer weekdays, 4550 Summer weekends, 4,270 Fall