



October 7, 2024

Recreation.gov: Overview and Issues for Congress

For many people looking to experience the country's federal lands and waters, their trip begins with a visit to Recreation.gov. Recreation.gov is a cloud-based website that offers federal recreation information, trip planning services, and reservation booking to the public for roughly 4,000 federal recreation areas and more than 120,000 campsites located at national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, waterways, and other locations. Booz Allen Hamilton Inc. (BAH), the current contractor, operates the website and reservation system on behalf of participating federal agencies. The U.S. Forest Service (FS) administers the contract for Recreation.gov.

Background and History

Public reservation systems for federal lands and waters have been in place since at least the early 1970s as a means to manage visitation and facilitate use of these resources. Until the 1990s, federal agencies offering reservation services generally did so independently, with little coordination. In 1995, FS and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) led the first interagency reservation initiative, known as the National Recreation Reservation Service (NRRS). In 1997, Park.net Inc. (later renamed ReserveAmerica Inc.) was awarded the contract to develop and operate the NRRS. In 1999, Park.net launched ReserveUSA.com—the first website offering online reservations and ticket sales for federal lands and waters.

Further efforts to consolidate and streamline federal recreation data and user experience occurred under the George W. Bush Administration. In 2002, the Recreation One Stop (R1S) program was established as part of the President's E-Government initiative. R1S refers to a multipronged, interagency program that oversees federal recreation reservation and trip planning services. It includes online booking services (i.e., Recreation.gov), administration of a joint federal recreation database (known as the Recreation Information Database [RIDB]), and a Technology Innovation Fund to allow for responsiveness to rapidly evolving technologies. As part of the R1S program, additional federal agencies joined the FS and USACE contract and consolidated their reservation and booking systems into one centralized online system. By 2007, this booking system had been rebranded as Recreation.gov.

Current Structure and Administration

In 2016, FS awarded a multiyear contract for management of Recreation.gov to BAH, following a competitive selection process. Pursuant to the contract, BAH is responsible for hosting, operating, and maintaining the Recreation.gov system. This includes the aggregation, storage, and maintenance of transaction data, as well as customer and technical support responsibilities. The federal government owns and is responsible for providing

recreation data from the RIDB, including facility types, mapping coordinates, and maximum occupancy details. The RIDB contains data from 14 participating government agencies (see **Table 1**)

Table 1. Recreation.gov Participating Agencies

Agencies Offering Reservations	Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, National Archives and Records Administration, National Park Service, Naval District Washington, Presidio Trust, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service
Agencies Sharing Data	Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Federal Highway Administration, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Smithsonian Institution, Tennessee Valley Authority

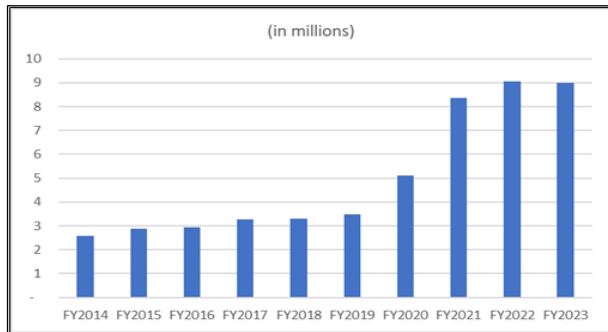
Source: CRS, Recreation.gov, "About Us," <https://www.recreation.gov/about-us>, October 7, 2024.

Pursuant to a 2018 memorandum of understanding, the participating agencies fund the operational costs associated with the R1S program. Each participating agency covers agency-specific operational support costs. Joint costs associated with program staff salaries, supplies, travel expenses, and preparation of contracts and agreements are determined by an annual budget review and are split equally between FS, the National Park Service (NPS), and USACE, the three agencies with the largest shares of facilities and services managed through Recreation.gov.

Revenues from Recreation.gov flow to the contractor (BAH), the participating federal agencies, and others. The Recreation.gov contract specifies that BAH is paid primarily through fees collected from reservations booked on the platform. Revenues are deposited into a U.S. Treasury account managed by FS through the R1S finance operations center. Disbursements are made on a monthly basis to participating agencies, concessioners, and BAH. Agencies may elect to have funds withheld from their monthly distributions to cover certain operational costs associated with the R1S program. Alternatively, agencies may transfer funds to FS to cover costs.

Usage and Revenue

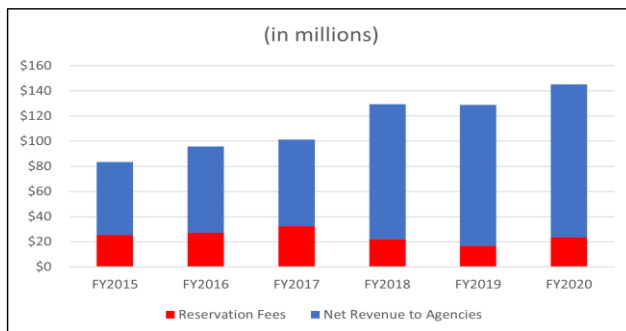
Users have increasingly turned to Recreation.gov to plan trips at federal recreation sites. Based on available data, roughly 9 million reservations were processed through Recreation.gov in FY2023, up from 3.5 million in FY2019 and 2.6 million in FY2013 (see **Figure 2**). According to BAH, from October 1, 2018, to December 31, 2023, Recreation.gov received more than 1.2 billion site visits.

Figure 1. Recreation.gov Reservations: FY2014-FY2023

Source: CRS, using “RIDB/Recreation.gov Historical Reservation Data,” at <https://ridb.recreation.gov/download>.

Notes: Figures are based on unique “HistoricalReservationID” attribute counts for each year. Figures for FY2019-FY2023 were reported by BAH. Figures for FY2014-FY2018 were reported by the previous contractor (Park.net) and may reflect different data collection methods. CRS cannot independently verify the accuracy of these data.

Public information on revenue generated through Recreation.gov is limited. **Figure 3** shows gross revenue from Recreation.gov across five of the participating agencies (Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, FS, and NPS) from FY2015 to FY2020. Gross revenue includes fees remitted to the Recreation.gov contractor and net revenue taken in by the five agencies.

Figure 2. Recreation.gov Gross Revenue (BLM, FWS, FS, NPS, and Reclamation), FY2015-FY2020
(adjusted for inflation to 2023 dollars)

Source: CRS, using data in *Report to Congress: Implementation of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, 2021*, p. 36. Adjustments for inflation (shown in 2023 dollars) were calculated using the GDP Chained Price Index from White House Office of Management and Budget, Historical Tables, Table 10.1.

Notes: Changes in the proportion of fees paid to contractors may reflect changes in contract provisions. Fees reported for FY2015-FY2017 were paid out under the terms of the contract with Park.net. Fees reported for FY2018-FY2020 were paid out under the terms of the contract with BAH.

Issues for Congress

As concerns regarding overcrowding of federal recreation sites have increased, some land managers have turned to Recreation.gov to help alleviate and manage crowd sizes. For example, federal land managers may opt to impose time-entry, advance ticket, or lottery systems for access to

certain lands and waters as a means to limit crowds and protect resources at risk for degradation. In such scenarios, consumers may be required to acquire a ticket or permit through Recreation.gov in advance of their visit to ensure access. Some stakeholders contend that the reservation and lottery systems implemented through the website are key to protecting the resources and improving the visitor experience. Others have raised concerns that the website can make accessing public lands and waters difficult, as certain popular destinations can be booked months in advance or within moments of availability going live on Recreation.gov. In 2024, Recreation.gov launched a new notification system that allows users to receive alerts when certain campground, tour, or hiking permits become available. Whether or the degree to which this feature may address these issues is not yet clear.

Some Members of Congress and stakeholders have raised concerns regarding third-party processing fees charged to users of Recreation.gov. The management contract between FS and BAH for management of Recreation.gov specifies that BAH may, upon federal approval, charge a commission for its services on a per-reservation basis. The processing fee is determined by BAH and is separate from entrance or recreation fees assessed by agencies under existing provisions of federal law. According to FS, these fees are deposited into a U.S. Treasury account and remitted on a monthly basis to BAH based on the total number of transactions committed. Unlike certain entrance and recreation fees, no portion of the processing fee is retained by the federal government. In March 2022, a District Court in Nevada found that a \$2 processing fee charged to access Red Rock Canyon was improperly assessed and violated the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (16 U.S.C. §§6801-6814; *Kotab v. Bureau of Land Management*, 595 F. Supp. 3d 947 D. Nev. 2022). In January 2023, stakeholders filed a class action lawsuit against BAH in a District Court in Virginia claiming such fees were illegal (*Wilson et al v. Booz Allen Hamilton, Inc.*, No. 1:23cv43 (E.D. Va.)). The lawsuit was subsequently withdrawn. Members of Congress have continued to seek clarification from agencies as to how processing fees are set and whether existing law allows for such fees to be assessed.

Concerns regarding limited availability of Recreation.gov permits and tickets, combined with the assessment of processing and other fees, also have led some lawmakers to question whether Recreation.gov adequately meets user needs. In particular, some lawmakers have raised questions as to whether Recreation.gov increases gaps in access to federal lands and waters among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. The Review and Evaluation of Strategies for Equal Reservations for Visitor Experiences (RESERVE) Federal Land Act (S. 4451) would direct the National Academy of Sciences to study reservation systems across federal lands—in particular, Recreation.gov. The study would cover reservation system design, system user demographics, and data availability and accessibility.

Mark K. DeSantis, Analyst in Natural Resources Policy
Eric P. Nardi, Analyst in Natural Resources Policy

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