



Protect America's Climbing



July 27, 2016

Director John Jarvis  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

**RE: Access Fund, American Alpine Club and American Mountain Guides Association Comments to the Denali National Park and Preserve Mountaineering Concession Contracts**

Dear Director Jarvis,

On behalf of the Access Fund, American Alpine Club, American Mountain Guides Association, and the American climbing public, we write to comment on the National Park Service's mountaineering franchise fee proposal in Denali National Park and Preserve (DNA). Denali is a world-class climbing destination and as America's premier climbing organizations, we offer our comments on the franchise fee increase proposal.

**Access Fund, American Alpine Club and American Mountain Guides Association**

The Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and American Mountain Guides Association (The Climbing Organizations) are national climbing advocacy organizations dedicated to climbing access, conservation, advancing the climbing way of life, and advocating for American climbers. The Climbing Organizations each have a long history of working with the National Park Service, including input on the 2006 revision to the NPS Management Policies, comment letters on hundreds of local management plans around the country including Denali National Park, rescue cost-recovery and recreation impact studies, grants, and many thousands of volunteer hours in support education and stewardship projects, field training and climbing management conferences, and congressional advocacy urging full funding for National Park Service operations. We have also long worked collaboratively with the National Park Service at dozens of other national parks around the country on climbing management planning initiatives and stewardship projects. The Access Fund<sup>1</sup> and the American Alpine Club hold Memorandums of Understanding with the National Park Service. For more about us, see [www.accessfund.org](http://www.accessfund.org), [www.americanalpineclub.org](http://www.americanalpineclub.org), and <http://amga.com>.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.accessfund.org/uploads/Access-Fund-NPS\\_MOU\\_-2014-2019.pdf](https://www.accessfund.org/uploads/Access-Fund-NPS_MOU_-2014-2019.pdf)

## GENERAL REMARKS

For 100 years mountaineers have been climbing Denali, and this activity is a traditional and appropriate use of the Park.<sup>2</sup> Further, Denali National Park's enabling law directs the NPS to establish park regulations and management policies that are "primarily aimed at the freest use of the park for recreation purposes by the public and for the preservation of animals, birds, and fish and for the preservation of the natural curiosities and scenic beauties thereof."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) Congress specifically directed the NPS to manage Denali National Park for "continued opportunities, including reasonable access, for mountain climbing, mountaineering and other wilderness recreational activities."<sup>4</sup> Because of its long history and specific management direction from Congress to maintain reasonable mountaineering access, mountain climbing should be viewed as a primary use and purpose of Denali National Park that the NPS should enhance and protect. A key element of this use is the ability of mountain guides to assist climbers on mountaineering adventures and to provide wilderness education.<sup>5</sup>

## COMMENTS

In the last decade, Denali has drawn on average 1,200 climbers a year who attempt to summit.<sup>6</sup> Climbing Denali is a serious undertaking that necessitates proficiency in glacier travel, route finding and crevasse rescue procedures. Guided climbing has become increasingly popular and it is an important way for climbers to safely experience the mountain.

It has come to our attention that DENA proposed an increased franchise fees from the traditional range of 3-9% to 18%. This would be an increase of nearly four times the current DENA franchise fee paid by DENA mountaineering concessioners and twice as high as the 2014 national average concession franchise fee.<sup>7</sup> According to NPS officials, franchise fees for individual contracts have increased an average of 2.4 percentage points as they have turned over and been awarded under the terms of the new Concessions Act.<sup>8</sup> Following this trend the franchise fee increase for DENA concessions should increase a maximum of 2.4% over the current franchise fees. We are concerned the proposed fee increase of 18% will result in unintended consequences to the visitor experience on Denali and place an undue burden on the mountaineering concessions.

The increase in franchise fees proposed will adversely impact visitor's access to educational programs and outdoor recreation opportunities due to the additional financial burden that it will impose on those who wish to hire a guide to experience DENA's

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/mountaineering.htm>

<sup>3</sup> 16 USC § 351.

<sup>4</sup> See ANILCA, at Section 202(3)(a), found at <http://alaska.fws.gov/asm/nilca/title02.html#203>.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/business-with-park.htm#CP\\_JUMP\\_1026006](https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/business-with-park.htm#CP_JUMP_1026006)

<sup>6</sup> NPS, Denali: <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/upload/OVERALLCLIMBERS-thru-2015.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> National Park Service, Revenues from Fees and Donations Increased, but Some Enhancements are Needed to Continue This Trend. December 2014. Accessed: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674187.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

glaciated mountains. We strongly believe that requiring an 18% franchise fee runs directly counter to the goals and vision outlined in the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative<sup>9</sup> which seeks to expand access to lands and waters for recreation, and the National Park Service's Find Your Park Campaign which promotes the American public's ability to connect with parks like Denali, "enjoy nature, and make new discoveries."<sup>10</sup> Imposing a high franchise fee for guides at DENA will inhibit both of these important initiatives.

Moreover, we are concerned this decision could be perceived to discriminate against those with an average-to-lower income who cannot afford a higher priced guide, and restricts open access to park visitors. In addition this fee proposal does not lend itself to ensuring the successes of the mountaineering concessioners who are valued park partners equally committed to visitor safety, wilderness education and the preservation of our natural heritage. We ask you to consider the possible ramifications this increased franchise fee could have on the outdoor recreation industry and future opportunities within all National Parks. To the best of our knowledge, 18% is the highest franchise fee of comparable concession service providers. In 2014 the National Park Service earned an average of 5% in franchise fees from contracts that attracted 1 or 2 bidders and an average of 16% in franchise fees from contracts that attracted 3 or more bidders.<sup>11</sup> Thus the DENA franchise fee increase to 18% is above the national average and if allowed could set an unsustainable precedent for small businesses.

## CONCLUSION

Denali National Park must preserve for future generations the unique natural conditions of DENA, as well as the outstanding mountaineering opportunities found there. An important part of maintaining reasonable access for climbing in the Park is to keep fees at a level that most American can afford. In order to accomplish this goal, the Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and American Mountain Guides Association ask DENA to reconsider the actual costs of mountaineering concessions in the Park, adjust the scope for this proposal, and implement a fee structure that is consistent with NPS policy and the fee rates applied to other Park users.

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The Climbing Organizations urge the NPS to re-evaluate the proposal to increase the franchise fees to 18% at DENA. The Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and American Mountain Guides Association look forward to future opportunities to work with the NPS to maintain climbing access and conserve the climbing environment at Denali National Park.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ceq/initiatives/ago>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/centennial/findyourpark.htm>

<sup>11</sup> National Park Service, Revenues from Fees and Donations Increased, but Some Enhancements are Needed to Continue This Trend. December 2014. Accessed: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674187.pdf>

Sincerely,



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