



CLEAN AIR 4 PARKS

The Economics of Clean Air in Parks

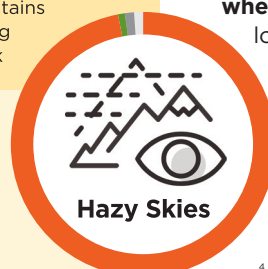
Millions of people visit our national parks and wilderness areas each year to see world renowned, awe-inspiring views. In 2024, 332 million national park visitors spent \$29 billion in local gateway regions, supported 340,000 jobs and added \$56.3 billion to the national economy.³ The same year, the outdoor recreation industry contributed \$1.2 trillion annually to the nation's economy, supported over 5 million jobs nationally, and accounted for 2.4 percent of our national gross domestic product (GDP) and as high as 6.1 percent of state GDP (Hawai'i).⁴

People all over the country and the world love our national parks and public lands, and millions of people dedicate their livelihoods to bringing these places to life through outdoor recreation guidance, retail, education, art, hospitality, restaurants and more. Business owners and employees, national park staff and visitors, all deserve clean, clear air to enjoy and sustain these treasured places.

Top: View of the Smoky Mountains from the downtown Gatlinburg ski lift ©William Britten | Istock

98%

of parks suffer from haze pollution



Visitors and Outdoor Businesses Need Clean Air

Visitors imagine national parks and wilderness areas as having the freshest, cleanest air, but sadly, many struggle with hazy skies and unhealthy air from human-caused air pollution. These special places are specifically protected by the bipartisan Clean Air Act and the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Regional Haze Rule, which the agency established decades ago to reduce air pollution and restore clean air to our treasured public lands.

Yosemite, Everglades, Acadia, Big Bend, Olympic and Mammoth Cave National Parks. Shining Rock, Badlands, Boundary Waters Canoe Area and Bridger Wilderness Areas. These are just a few of our nation's greatest wild places that experience widespread effects from air pollution including harm to sensitive natural plants and wildlife, ruined scenic views and endangered visitor health. In fact, **ninety-seven percent of national parks experience significant or unsatisfactory air pollution problems, including hazy skies.**¹

On average, a visitor to a national park misses out on over 50 miles of scenic views they've often come from afar to enjoy. Park visitation noticeably decreases when air quality is poor,² impacting local gateway businesses, in-park

businesses and communities that depend on park visitation to support their local economies. Additionally, air pollution—inside or outside of national parks—impacts public health and is correlated with many illnesses that result in missed school days for kids and lost work for parents and adults.

Behind all these numbers are children, families, recreation enthusiasts, business owners and park employees with firsthand experience dealing with the effects of unhealthy air that causes breathing problems, exacerbates health issues and ruins views. **Clean air isn't a luxury**—it is critical infrastructure for healthy employees, strong tourism and resilient local economies.

¹ D. Orozco, U. Reeves, N. Levine. 2024. *Polluted Parks: How Air Pollution and Climate Change Continue to Harm America's National Parks*. National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). Washington, DC: <https://www.npca.org/reports/air-climate-report>.

² David Keiser et al., Air pollution and visitation at U.S. national parks. *Sci. Adv.* 4, eaat1613 (2018). DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aat1613

³ National Park Service, 2024 National Park Visitor Spending Effects, Sept. 2025: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>.

⁴ Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation, 2024: <https://www.bea.gov/news/2026/outdoor-recreation-economic-statistics-us-and-states-2024>.

What is Haze Pollution?

While most air pollution doesn't originate in national parks and public lands, it can travel hundreds of miles from its source, affecting parks near and far—including remote ones. Haze is made of tiny airborne particles called particulate matter (also known as soot) and gases that block light while reducing visibility and jeopardizing public health.

The air pollution that causes haze comes from a variety of sources including coal-fired power plants, chemical and plastics manufacturers, oil and gas operations, industrial agriculture, cement plants, pulp and paper mills, and vehicles. Emissions from these and other sources can be regulated under the Haze Rule, and with strong plans, we could anticipate steep reductions in:

■ Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x),

Ammonia, & Sulfur Dioxide

(SO₂): All three are direct and indirect sources of particulate matter (PM) that cause haze.

■ Volatile Organic Compounds

(VOCs): VOCs and NO_x both contribute to the formation of haze pollution and ozone, or smog, which is dangerous to breathe. Cutting both helps solve haze and ozone problems.

■ Carbon Dioxide, Mercury & Other Toxic Emissions:

Reducing haze pollutants often results in corresponding decreases in these pollutants.

Protect the “Clean Air For Parks” Rule

The Regional Haze Rule is the blueprint to reduce—and eventually eliminate—human-caused air pollution in America's most iconic 48 national parks and 108 wilderness areas (designated and called Class I areas). Class I areas have specific air quality protections through the Regional Haze Rule; a time-tested, effective program that requires federal and state agencies, federal land managers and stakeholders to work together to make continuous progress in curbing emissions and restoring clear skies in Class I areas.

While parks and wilderness areas have achieved some improvements in visibility over time, there is still a lot of work to do—**no Class I area has achieved the Clean Air Act goal of natural visibility.** And unfortunately, we are headed in the wrong direction.

Recent actions by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicate a clear desire to let states and polluting facilities off the hook for their haze pollution. **Expected changes to the Haze Rule in 2026 would dramatically weaken the Rule and undermine years of consistent agency interpretation.**

Possible proposals from EPA could allow states to avoid making any further reasonable progress to cut emissions by allowing states to:

1. Claim that visibility issues in Class I areas have already improved “enough,”
2. Claim past actions as sufficient for satisfying current obligations,
3. Claim no pollution reductions are necessary, and
4. Avoid developing regional haze plans regularly or at all.

Since the Regional Haze Program was created, changes to the rule and revisions to EPA guidance have occurred from time to time to modify the program or how it is interpreted. While adjustments like that are typical, such a concerted effort to completely weaken and undermine effectiveness of this crucial clean air program **is unprecedented.** This action should alarm and concern anyone who values clean, healthy air and clear skies in their park experience. **We need your help in speaking up to protect the Clean Air for Parks Rule from rollbacks!**

Outdoor and recreation business voices are critical to protecting the Regional Haze Program and holding states, polluting facilities and the EPA accountable for harmful air pollution. Please join NPCA in our efforts!



Above: Hiker enjoying the view of Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona ©Margaret Wiktor | iStock

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