FD 2026-09 · Field Dispatch · Protected Areas & Fragile Sites Program

Timed-Entry Reservations in U.S. National Parks: Gate Queues, Early-Morning Displacement, and Gateway-Town Spillovers

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Meridian Tourism Research Institute, New York, NY · July 15, 2026 · DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.24355867

Abstract. From Arches to Glacier's Going-to-the-Sun Road, $2 timed-entry permits have ended three-hour highway backups—while triggering pre-7 a.m. arrival surges and fierce political pushback from gateway chambers of commerce. Empirical highlights: $2.00 (Recreation.gov reservation processing fee on top of standard NPS entrance passes); 7 a.m.–4 p.m. (Standard Arches timed-entry window, creating a sharp pre-7 a.m. arrival spike); 0 closures (Unplanned mid-day gate shutdowns at Arches during timed-entry months vs. 100+ closures in 2021).

JEL Classification: H27, H71, L83, Q26, R21 | **Keywords:** visitor levies, carrying capacity, short-term rentals, municipal finance

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1. Why Arches is the cleanest natural experiment in the National Park System

Most large national parks have four or five highway entrances, complicating efforts to measure vehicle displacement. Arches National Park outside Moab, Utah has essentially one paved public entrance off U.S. Route 191. In 2021, when post-pandemic road-trip demand pushed Arches to 1.81 million visits, park rangers had to temporarily close the entrance gate more than 100 times—often for three to five hours at mid-day—whenever interior parking lots at Devils Garden and Delicate Arch filled completely.[1]

Beginning in April 2022, the National Park Service introduced mandatory one-hour timed-entry windows between 7:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., booked online via Recreation.gov for a $2 administrative fee. Unplanned mid-day highway gate closures fell to zero during active reservation months, and visitor intercept surveys conducted by Utah State University researchers found over 80 percent satisfaction among visitors who successfully entered the park.[1]

Table 1. Timed-entry reservation designs across major U.S. National Park Service units (2021–2026)

Park unit	Regulated corridor or gate	Operating window	Permit design	Observed spillover / political tension
Arches NP (Utah)	Entire park (single U.S. 191 entrance)	7:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. (peak spring/fall; summer pause tested)	1-hour arrival blocks ($2 fee)	Moab hoteliers & Grand County debated mid-summer July–Aug exemption
Glacier NP (Montana)	West Going-to-the-Sun Rd & North Fork	7:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m. (mid-June to Sept.)	Switched in 2025 from 1-day pass to 2-hour timed blocks	Heavy pre-7 a.m. entry & unreserved East-side St. Mary afternoon inflows
Rocky Mountain NP (Colorado)	Bear Lake Corridor vs. rest of park	5:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m. (Bear Lake); 9:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. (rest)	Two-tier corridor + parkwide 2-hour windows	5 a.m. Bear Lake start prevents the dawn rush seen at 7 a.m. parks
Zion NP (Utah)	Angels Landing trailhead (chain section)	All day, year-round	Seasonal & day-before hiker lottery ($6 app + $3/person)	Cuts narrow-ridge crowding without restricting Zion Canyon shuttle access

2. Two unintended margins: the 6:15 a.m. rush and BLM public-land spillovers

Hourly traffic-counter loops inside Arches and Glacier reveal a textbook boundary effect. Whenever a timed-entry window begins at 7:00 a.m. (or previously 6:00 a.m. at Glacier), travelers without reservations line up at 5:45 a.m. to 6:45 a.m., shifting the daily peak from 10:30 a.m. into dawn hours and filling trailhead lots before 7:00 a.m. reservation holders even reach the booth. Rocky Mountain National Park solved that boundary spike on its high-demand Bear Lake Road only by pushing the permit start time back to 5:00 a.m.[2]

Second, turned-away spontaneous travelers do not vanish from eastern Utah. Surrounding Arches are vast Bureau of Land Management (BLM) canyons—Corona Arch, Fisher Towers, Sand Flats—and Dead Horse Point State Park, which carry lighter ranger staffing and fewer vault toilets than NPS units. Gateway business associations in Moab and Kalispell have simultaneously lobbied congressional delegations over reduced walk-in foot traffic from unreserved highway travelers, illustrating that even when a $2 quota raises inside-the-fence visitor welfare, gateway retail towns bear the variance of denied walk-up entries.

References

[1] U.S. National Park Service, Arches National Park Timed Entry Pilot Reports (2022–2025); Jordan W. Smith, Monjaellino, and colleagues, Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, Utah State University, visitor experience evaluations of Arches National Park timed entry.

[2] U.S. National Park Service, Glacier National Park 2025 Timed Entry Vehicle Reservation Plan (adopting two-hour entry blocks from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) and Rocky Mountain National Park Timed Entry Permit System (5:00 a.m. Bear Lake Road start).

Suggested Citation: Saechueng, Chaiwat, and Mukesh Thakur. 2026. "Timed-Entry Reservations in U.S. National Parks: Gate Queues, Early-Morning Displacement, and Gateway-Town Spillovers." Meridian Field Dispatch FD 2026-09, July 15, 2026. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24355867.

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