



Backroom Politics Means Air Tour Noise Remains at Grand Canyon

Progress Made in Implementing Decade Old Laws to Increase Safety and Enhance Visitor Enjoyment at Grand Canyon National Park Comes to a Screeching Halt

July 2012. Grand Canyon National Park will stay noisy from air tours, thanks to last minute secret maneuvers during passage of a federal transportation funding bill by Congress before their July Fourth recess.

The compromise legislation includes several anti-environmental measures pushed by Republican leadership in the House, but this provision was in neither the Senate nor House version before final negotiations started.

Ironically, this came immediately before the National Park Service was prepared to issue final recommendations on reducing air tour noise over Grand Canyon. This followed years of agency noise studies costing \$6 million and after gathering almost 30,000 public comments.

The Park Service plan was expected to extend quiet hours in the morning and evening, move air tour routes away from popular beaches, trails and overlooks during certain seasons, and limit air tour numbers in the future.

The National Parks Air Tour Management Act of 2000 and National Parks Overflights Act of 1987 were passed to increase the safety of commercial air tours and enhance the enjoyment of park visitors. While progress has been slow, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Park Service

(NPS) were on the cusp of making real progress towards implementing these two important laws, with a final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision expected this summer.

But now, Congress has locked into place the noise we have today at Grand Canyon. They have stopped the Park Service from protecting the natural quiet of our premier national park.

The law is now changed to allow half the park to have unlimited aircraft noise, and allow the rest of the park to hear air tour noise 25% of the time throughout the day. Plus air tour numbers can increase into the future.

Rep. Paul Gosar (R-northern Arizona) introduced legislation earlier this year very similar to the Grand Canyon provisions included in the transportation bill, and Senators John McCain and Jon Kyl, both Republicans, issued a joint statement supporting the new language.

What You Can Do

Please write a letter to the editor of your newspaper questioning why noisy commercial air tours will be allowed to damage the Grand Canyon's natural quiet.

Some Background Information

Passed in 1987, the National Parks Overflights Act recognized that aircraft noise in Grand Canyon National Park was “causing a significant adverse effect on the natural quiet and experience of the park.” The law directed the Secretary of Interior to submit recommendations for steps to reduce the noise. “The recommendations [and associated plan] shall provide for substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of the park,” the law continued. Under the plan, the FAA Administrator must implement the recommendations of the Secretary without change unless it would adversely affect aviation safety.

In a 1995 report to Congress, the NPS defined the “substantial restoration of natural quiet” at Grand Canyon National Park. They then updated and clarified their definition of Substantial Restoration of Natural Quiet in a 2008 Federal Register notice to specify that the park will be restored *when reductions in noise from aircraft operations below 18,000 feet mean sea level (MSL) results in 50% or more of the park achieving restoration of the natural quiet (i.e., no aircraft audible) for 75% to 100% of the day, each and every day.* The NPS also clarified that 50% of GCNP is a minimum in the restoration goal.

In June 2011, the NPS released the Draft Grand Canyon Overflights Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and received nearly 30,000 comments from the public. Key issues under consideration included seasonal closures of certain routes over the canyon to achieve a period of respite and quiet, modification of the total number of flights authorized each year, closure of certain parts of the canyon to overflights or additional flights, modification of authorized routes away from popular hiking and camping areas, and a requirement for use of new, quieter aircraft.

Importantly, all aircraft operating at or above 18,000 feet MSL including military, high-altitude commercial, and general-aviation overflights, are included in basic analysis of cumulative noise effects, *but would not be regulated and considered* under the NPS’s definition of restoring natural quiet to the park.

Currently, there are approximately 58,000 commercial air tour operations taking place at the park. Under the park’s draft preferred alternative, operators would be allowed to fly up 65,000 air tours per year with a daily cap of 364 air-tours. The NPS’s draft preferred alternative also provides numerous incentives for quiet technology. For instance, quieter technology aircraft would not have to meet annual allocations three months each year. Also, only quiet-technology aircraft would be permitted to fly certain routes.

Despite the fact that the NPS is proposing to allow for 8,000 more air tours per year and doesn’t plan or have the authority to regulate aircraft above 18,000 feet, certain members of Congress have expressed concern to the contrary and have introduced legislation.

On March 16, Representative Gosar (R-AZ) and others introduced a separate bill that would dramatically weaken the NPS’s definition of substantial restoration of natural quiet and allow for more noise from commercial air tours. Park advocates strongly opposed this bill. This bill was the basis for the amendment to the Transportation Act.

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