Former Shenandoah National Park rangers raise alarm about federal cuts

Shenandoah National Park near "breaking point"

By Tate Hewitt Staff Writer Mar 26, 2025



Retired Shenandoah National Park rangers are concerned about the impact of recent federal cuts.

Here, from left, Jim Schaberl, Jim Northup and Sally Hurlbert are pictured at sunrise at Hazel Mountain Overlook on Friday, March 21, 2025.

Photo by Doug Stroud

Shenandoah National Park is used to government cuts. Despite their popularity, national parks receive only a tiny fraction of the federal budget — about 0.015% — and yet more people visit every year.

“I’ve seen the park shrink our budget, and we have made it work, more with less,” said Sally Hurlbert, a park ranger who retired three years ago. “But at some point, you’re going to hit a breaking point.”

Former park rangers who spoke with the *Fauquier Times* say that Shenandoah is nearing that breaking point as President Donald Trump’s administration is slashing the federal budget and workforce, causing multiple cuts at Virginia’s largest national park, including the dismissal of 15 full-time employees.

This is the highest number of firings at the 63 parks across the country, except for Everglades National Park which tied Shenandoah in losses.



Staff photo by Meghan Mangrum

Hurlbert said those workers were 10% of the park's employees, and nine of them were fee collectors — which might translate to longer lines to enter the park and budget shortfalls as the busy summer season ramps up.

“It's like if you had a store and you know you had all these products to sell — well, you just laid off all your cashiers. How are you going to sell products if there's no cashiers to sell them?” Hurlbert said.

The rangers in the two booths at each of Shenandoah’s four entrances collect around $10 million for the park annually, a sizable amount compared to the $12 million the park historically received from the federal government.

Recreation fees **pay for a lot** at the park.

The $30 collected from every vehicle funds stonemasons who fix the stone walls along 105 miles of Skyline Drive, pays for the removal of invasive species, bankrolls the signs that guide and direct visitors, fills the park's ambulance with EMS equipment, maintains the wastewater treatment plant and hires staff at Dickey Ridge Visitor Center.

“It's just mind-boggling that they basically didn't think about who they were firing,” Hurlbert said.



Skyline Drive runs 105 miles north and south along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Shenandoah National Park. It is the only public road through the park.

Staff photo by Meghan Mangrum

More cuts, longer lines and dirty bathrooms

The firing of provisional employees are just one of several cost-cutting measures trickling down from the newly created federal Department of Governmental Efficiency — each one impacting service within Shenandoah, and possibly the economies of nearby counties.

That’s because, **according to the National Park Service**, national parks have a huge, positive impact on the economies of nearby communities. Visitors to Shenandoah spent $114 million locally in 2023, and the “gateway economies” gained $160 million in economic output.

Fauquier County, which stands between Shenandoah and day trippers from Washington, D.C., is one of those communities. Although there’s no county-specific data on the economic impact of Shenandoah, about 7.8% of all jobs in Fauquier County are sustained by tourism and 1,287 jobs were directly financed by visitor dollars, according to the Virginia Tourism Corp.

“These are the economic engines of local economies, and we’re gutting them,” said Jessica Cocciolone, executive director of Shenandoah National Park Trust. The organization plans to donate an all-time high of $1 million to the park this year, but she says that’s no replacement for federal funding.

As funds drop, the number of visitors to Shenandoah is expected to rise in 2025 **for the 30th year straight**. Last year, over 1.7 million people visited the park.

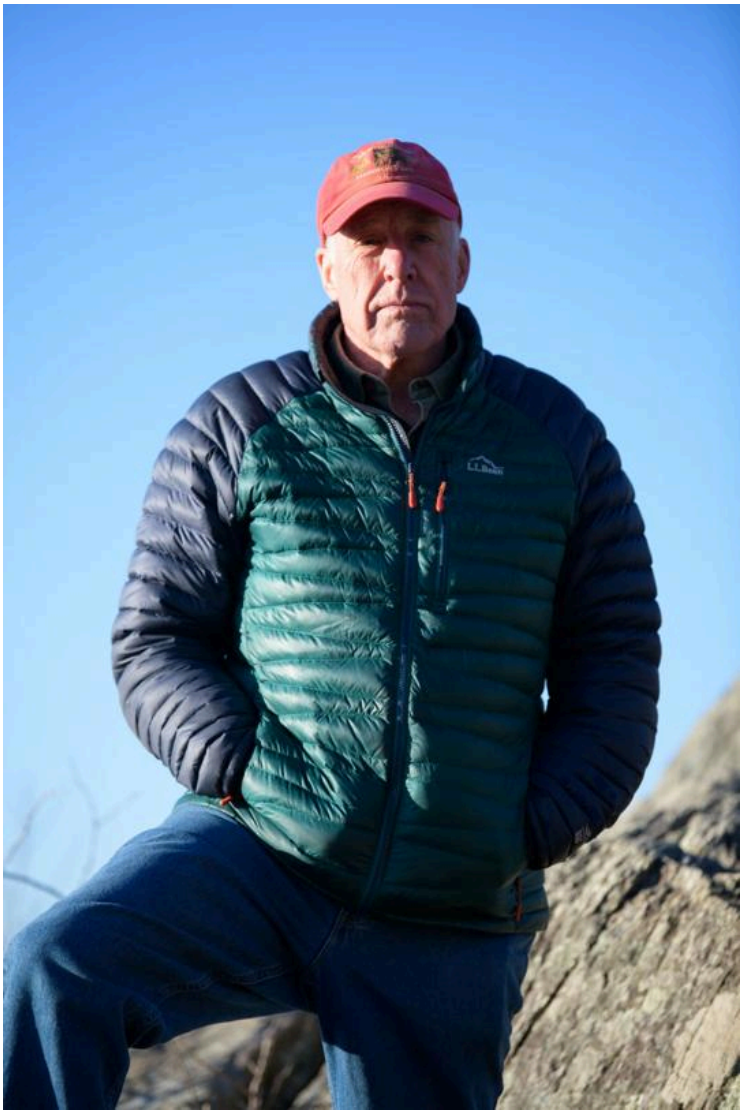
“There's absolutely no reason to think that visitation will decline unless the park falls into disrepair,” said Jim Northup, who was superintendent of Shenandoah from 2013 to 2017.

But that’s exactly what former rangers are worried about, since the cuts include spending accounts, company credit cards and hiring freezes. The changes made it more difficult to hire seasonal employees, newly hired employees were dismissed, and at least two attempts were made to lure senior staff into early retirement.

Bill Wade, executive director of the Association of National Park Rangers, says the cuts are already leading to issues at national parks across the county.

Some parks have overfilled trash cans and dirty restrooms, reduced hours or even closed visitor centers. Many parks are having cash-flow issues after credit cards were limited.

“They’ve placed a cap on those credit cards of $1,” Wade said. “Some parks can’t buy toilet paper and can’t pay utility bills.”



Jim Northup was a National Park Service employee for 36 years. He retired in 2017 after serving as the superintendent of Shenandoah National Park for four years. Here he is pictured at Hazel Mountain Overlook on Friday, March 21, 2025.

Photo by Doug Stroud



From left, retired rangers Jim Schaberl, Jim Northup and Sally Hurlbert pictured at sunrise at the Hazel Mountain Overlook on Friday, March 21, 2025.

Photo by Doug Stroud

Deferred maintenance

The park receives $12 million in “base funding,” a number that has stagnated across the National Park Service since 2011, according to a 2024 budget request from the U.S. Department of the Interior.

As funding dropped, so did the numbers of full-time employees that the National Park Service could afford — almost 19% of its full-time staff left and were not replaced.

Until now, that funding gap has been hidden from visitors’ gaze, said Jim Schaberl, a former Division Chief of Natural and Cultural Resources.

When he started at Shenandoah in 2008, there was a carpenter crew that maintained park buildings and historic structures.

“When I left (in 2023), there weren't any — the carpenter position wasn't filled, and there wasn’t a crew.”

Lack of staffing and funds has led to neglect that the National Park Service calls “deferred maintenance" – **a huge problem system-wide**. At Shenandoah alone, these late repairs to buildings, roads and trails add up to $191 million.

“A lot of (the buildings) are pretty rough. They can’t keep up on the roof, they can't keep up on the painting,” Schaberl said.

An “ugly triage game”

Leaders say that firing an entire crop of early-career rangers will impact the park for decades.

“They’re the next generation of park stewards, who are going to be taking care of these places and serving the public that comes to parks,” Northup said. “The administration is really damaging not just this current cadre of employees, but the next generation of employees that take care of our national park system.”

More experienced park employees were offered buyouts earlier this year by the new Department of Government Efficiency, which promised government workers nine months of pay without work if they took early retirement.

According to Jessica Cocciolone, at least two employees at Shenandoah decided to do just that, but that doesn’t mean the federal government will be picking up the bill.



Jim Schaberl was the division chief of Natural and Cultural Resources at Shenandoah National Park from 2008-2023. He told the *Fauquier Times* that Shenandoah's last funding increase for operations was fifteen years ago. Here he is pictured at Hazel Mountain Overlook on Friday, March 21, 2025.

Photo by Doug Stroud

“The park has to pay for those positions from people who aren't working,” Cocciolone said, “That all comes out of the park’s budget — $12 million doesn’t go very far.”'



Skyline Drive runs 105 miles north and south along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Shenandoah National Park. It is the only public road through the park.

Staff photo by Meghan Mangrum

This week, Cocciolone heard of a second offer that promises a $25,000 bonus for workers who retire early, further undercutting leadership and funding at the park.

For new hires, park supervisors have been instructed to follow a “four-in-one” rule of hiring; they are allowed to hire only one employee for every four vacancies.

But the largest cuts in employment are likely to come from a “reduction in force," a process that all agencies have been asked to begin.

Schaberl said these measures will force supervisors to play an “ugly triage game,” of cutting necessary, but not legally mandated, services such as trail maintenance and wildlife control.

“That’s the piece that will have the longest lasting damage,” Schaberl said. “Nobody’s asking, can you still do your job?”



Portions of the Appalachian Trail, which spans 2,200 miles from Georgia to Main, cut through Shenandoah National Park.
Staff photo by Meghan Mangrum

Cuts might make parks more dangerous

Sally Hurlbert worries that reducing employees might make the park less safe for visitors.

That's because full-time park rangers are cross trained in emergency roles, giving a lean park service the flexibility to respond to problems in unique ecological environments.

Fee collectors, trail workers and park interpreters might seem like the most expendable rangers, but their "collateral duties" might be positions in search and rescue, law enforcement and fighting wildfires.

"If they don't have the staff to do that, people are going to get hurt in the backcountry," Hurlbert said.

"My title might be 'interpretive park ranger,' for which my main duties are to take people out on nature hikes and do evening campfire programs — but my collateral duties are I'm a public information officer when there's a fire and I'm a search and rescue officer."

Northup said superintendents often call on workers with collateral duties to rescue injured hikers who can't be reached by helicopter.

"If someone should break their ankle on Old Rag – one of the most popular hiking destinations in the park – it takes 20 to 30 people to get that person out of the backcountry," Northup said, "It's really arduous, physical work over very rough terrain."

As the park moves into fire season, the threat of fewer employees who can double as firefighters might be compounded by frozen credit cards. Schaberl said the National Park Service uses these cards to send firefighters all over the nation.

But now, no travel is authorized, and there are no credit cards to fill gas tanks or pay firefighters' hotel bills.

"Here at Shenandoah, we've had people from all over the country come and help us during a wildfire. And vice-versa, we send people out to go help others," Schaberl said.



Sally Hurlbert worked as a park ranger for the Interpretation and Education Division in Shenandoah National Park until 2022. The permanent staff in that division has been cut by about 80% since she started working there in 1996. Here she is pictured at Hazel Mountain Overlook on Friday, March 21, 2025.

Photo by Doug Stroud

"There's all this gyration, all these efforts that are taking rangers away from running the park. And if this is under the guise of efficiency — chaos is not efficiency, and what they've created is chaos."



Staff photo by Meghan Mangrum

Current Shenandoah National Park officials declined to provide details about the park's revenue, federal funding and staffing.

In response to emailed questions, public affairs officer Allysah Fox told the *Fauquier Times* she wasn't allowed to share that information.

A spokesperson for the National Park Service's Office of Public Affairs told the *Fauquier Times* that some fired employees might be reinstated, but did not reply to other questions.

"In compliance with court orders, the Department of the Interior is reinstating employees. All impacted employees will receive back pay, and the Department will ensure continued compensation as the White House pursues its appeals process," the spokesperson said in an email.

Last week, two federal judges said the mass layoffs of some workers was illegal and ordered them to be reinstated pending further litigation. Agencies are detailing ways they are working to reinstitute thousands of fired workers, including parks service employees, but many of those workers are being alternatively being placed on administrative leave.

The Trump administration is also appealing those decisions.

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