Idaho Parks and Recreation Receives CARES Act Funding to Cover COVID-19 Impacts to Parks, Sees Record Visitation

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The nearly $1.3 million in relief funds will repair and improve hard-hit park facilities, cover increased operational expenses, and allow acquisition of needed equipment to keep high-use areas safe.

Idaho's 30 State Parks are experiencing a record-breaking year for visitation, and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding will greatly ease the burden, said Pete Black, chairman of the Parks and Recreation Board.

"During the pandemic, people have rediscovered the outdoors as a way to safely cope with this crisis, bringing people out to play and camp in record numbers," Black said. "That's wonderful but is also a strain on the parks. We so appreciate the support from Gov. Brad Little and the Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee (CFAC)."

Most of the funding will repair and improve parking areas at four parks: Thousand Springs (Box Canyon); Priest Lake (Lionhead), Farragut (Eagle Cove Boat Launch), and Bear Lake (East Beach). The projects will provide a better visitor experience for years to come, Black said.

Some of the remaining CARES funding will cover increased costs associated with operating during the outbreak, including processing thousands of canceled reservations. In the spring, the department allowed the public to cancel reservations for COVID-related reasons, waiving the standard $10 processing fee, which the department absorbed.

The last bit of CARES funding will purchase additional cleaning equipment to keep heavily used areas in parks disinfected in the most effective and economical manner.

"Kudos to Susan Buxton, our interim director, and her staff for recognizing the needs and reaching out to Gov. Little and Coronavirus Financial Advisory Committee," Black said. "This will allow us to continue to provide quality recreational opportunities to the public at this time of record use."

As of October 1, visitation at Idaho State Parks set an annual record in 2020, despite the year having more than two months to go and the 60-day closure of camping due to COVID-19 concerns. More than 6.5 million visitors (campers and day users) have enjoyed the parks this year, surpassing the prior yearly visitation record by about 100,000 guests.