

Funding for national parks threatened

By Raju Chebium, Gannett

WASHINGTON – Unless Congress prevents \$85 billion in across-the-board budget cuts before March 1, iconic national parks like Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon and the Great Smoky Mountains will take a financial hit.

A memo by National Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis tells park officials nationwide to prepare to make \$100 million of cuts if the budget sequester becomes a reality.

Like most agencies, the park service would have to cut 5.1 percent of its budget this year as part of the congressionally approved process to trim the national debt. The Defense Department faces spending reductions of about 7.3 percent.

California parks that face the ax include Yosemite (\$1.43 million in potential cuts), the newly re-designated Pinnacles National Park (\$172,000), Death Valley (\$435,000) and Sequoia/Kings Canyon (\$820,000).

“We expect that a cut of this magnitude ... will result in reductions to visitor services, hours of operation, shortening of seasons and possibly closing the areas during periods when there is insufficient staff,” Jarvis wrote in the Jan. 25 memo.

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees obtained the memo and related documents and released them.

The park service declined comment and referred reporters to the Office of Management and Budget. The OMB didn't return an email.

The Park Service Retirees' spokeswoman, Joan Anzelmo, said the

documents spell out just what changes and service reductions millions of visitors can expect this summer when they visit a national park, monument or heritage area.

“We’re just trying to raise the alarm to let the citizens of our country understand what (the cuts) mean,” said Anzelmo, the former superintendent at the Colorado National Monument. “Right now, it’s been sort of theoretical. ... What we’re doing is we’re trying to explain it with more specifics.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said last week that he’s working on an alternative to the automatic cuts but warned that Congress may not get it done before March 1. If Congress misses the deadline, the Obama administration can take steps to soften the blow for a few weeks.