

## A Review of the Mississippi State Park System

**CONCLUSIONS:** Without an annual general fund appropriation, state park operations are not self-sustaining. The state park system relies on contract workers for 39% of the state park workforce, which creates a revolving door of staff within the state park system. Internal challenges facing the state park system include a lack of prioritization in maintenance planning, a lack of strategic marketing, and a lack of accountability for cash payments made at park entrances. Many of the internal issues facing the state park system could be addressed if department staff used available financial and programmatic data to guide decision-making. Mississippi's state park system faces competition from other state, federal, and private competitors that affect the state park system's market share of outdoor recreation enthusiasts. MDWFP and the Legislature have options available to improve existing park operations and/or to improve the economic and intrinsic value of Mississippi's state parks.

### Background

The Mississippi State Legislature created the Mississippi state park system in 1934. Since 1989, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) has overseen the park system through its Bureau of Parks and Recreation.

The Mississippi state park system includes 25 state parks. Currently there are 21 state parks operated by the Bureau of Parks and Recreation, 3 parks operated by other governmental entities, and 1 park repurposed for use by other MDWFP bureaus.

The state park system employs 78 full-time employees and 50 contract workers.

### Financial Challenges Facing the State Park System

From FY 2018 to FY 2020, state park operations incurred an average net loss of \$3,744,744 when general fund revenue is not included. State park operations are not self-sustaining without a general fund appropriation.

	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020
Total Revenue	\$13,734,000	\$13,040,029	\$11,115,584
Total Expenses	\$13,701,191	\$11,921,091	\$11,368,032
<b>Net Income (Loss)</b>	<b>\$32,809</b>	<b>\$1,118,938</b>	<b>(\$252,448)</b>
Less General Fund Support	\$4,174,414	\$4,074,715	\$3,884,404
<b>Self-Generated Net Income (Loss)</b>	<b>(\$ 4,141,605)</b>	<b>(\$2,955,777)</b>	<b>(\$4,136,852)</b>

### Data-Driven Decision Making

At present, MDWFP does not use available reservation data to guide either its maintenance or marketing efforts. By increasing utilization of reservation data, MDWFP could better inform its maintenance planning efforts and more strategically market underutilized amenities that represent good sources of revenue.

### State Park Competition

Due to the multitude of state and federal camping opportunities in Mississippi existing outside of the state park system, 15 state parks have competition within a 15-mile radius, while 4 others have competition within a 30-mile radius.

### Comparison to Neighboring State Park Systems

Neighboring state park systems employ more staff, operate more parks, and have more expenditures and self-generated revenues than Mississippi's state park system. However, these neighboring state park systems all have a dedicated revenue sources (e.g., Arkansas' 1/8 of 1 cent sales tax diversion, Alabama's cigarette tax diversion) to support park maintenance and operations.



## Report Conclusions

1

State park operations are unsustainable without an annual general fund appropriation.

2

State park staff levels have declined, and the park system relies heavily on contract workers.

3

The state park system's use of honesty boxes to collect general entrance fees results in a lack of accountability of such funds.

4

The state park system does not strategically prioritize maintenance projects despite readily available data.

5

The lack of a strategic marketing plan inhibits maximizing park visitation.

6

The state park system faces internal and external competition from other parks and camping options.

## Recommendations

1. MDWFP should utilize data-driven decision-making to prioritize maintenance projects compiled within the annual State Parks Capital Needs document and the park maintenance booklet.
2. The Legislature should consider directing the Department of Finance and Administration Bureau of Building to perform an updated architectural needs study and cost assessment of the state park system.
3. MDWFP should identify areas within the Bureau of Parks and Recreation that are critical staffing needs, and consider efforts to increase the number of state park employees hired as FTE PINs rather than contractual workers.
4. MDWFP should develop and implement a formal strategic marketing plan to promote the state parks. MDWFP should continue to explore methods to promote the parks, including enhancing its online presence, and track any changes in park attendance attributable to those efforts.
5. Given the potential for non-payment of entry fees as a result of the existing honesty box system at most of the state parks, MDWFP should determine whether the cost of replacing its current reservation system with staff and mechanical gate arms would be equivalent to, or less than, average honesty box systems.
6. In order to address declining general fund support and staffing levels, MDWFP should consider options to generate additional revenue and support existing park staff. Such options include, but are not limited to, upgrading the "MS State Parks" app, expanding upon public and private relationships to support the state park system, and considering contracting with private vendors for additional park amenities.
7. The Legislature could modify the current governing structure of the Mississippi state park system by removing it from the governance of MDWFP in order to strive to maximize the potential benefits of the state park system as a tourist attraction and outdoor recreational activity.