

Gun ban in national parks is eased

Concealed-weapons permits, state permission will be required

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WASHINGTON - People will now be able to carry concealed firearms in some national parks and wildlife refuges.

An Interior Department rule issued Friday allows an individual to carry a loaded weapon in a park or wildlife refuge — but only if the person has a permit for a concealed weapon, and if the state where the park or refuge is located also allows loaded firearms in parks. The rule overturns a Reagan-era regulation that has restricted loaded guns in parks and wildlife refuges. The previous regulations required that firearms be unloaded and placed somewhere that is not easily accessible, such as in a car trunk. Assistant Interior Secretary Lyle Laverty said the new rule respects a long tradition of states and the federal government working together on natural resource issues.

The regulation allows individuals to carry concealed firearms in federal parks and wildlife refuges to the same extent they can lawfully do so under state law, Laverty said, adding that the approach is in line with rules adopted by the federal Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. Those agencies let visitors carry weapons consistent with applicable federal and state laws.

The National Rifle Association hailed the rule change, which will take effect next month before President-elect Barack Obama takes office. "We are pleased that the Interior Department recognizes the right of law-abiding citizens to protect themselves and their families while enjoying America's national parks and wildlife refuges," said Chris W. Cox, the NRA's chief lobbyist. The rule will restore the rights of law-abiding gun owners on federal lands and make federal law consistent with the state where the lands are located, Cox said. The NRA led efforts to change gun regulations they called inconsistent and unclear.

A group representing park rangers, retirees and conservation organizations said the rule change will lead to confusion for visitors, rangers and other law enforcement agencies. "Once again, political leaders in the Bush administration have ignored the preferences of the American public by succumbing to political pressure, in this case generated by the National Rifle Association," said Bill Wade, president of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees. "This regulation will put visitors, employees and precious resources of the National Park System at risk. We will do everything possible to overturn it and return to a commonsense approach to guns in national parks that has been working for decades," Wade said. The park rule will be published in the Federal Register next week and take effect 30 days later, well before Obama takes office Jan. 20. Overturning the rule could take months or even years, since it would require the new administration to restart the lengthy rule-making process.