The U.S. government entered a partial shutdown on December 22. The shutdown began because of a dispute about whether Congress should provide money to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. Now 800,000 government workers either can't work or can't be paid for their work until the shutdown ends.

The shutdown has left America's national parks largely unsupervised. No one is at the gate. No one is collecting a fee. The visitor centers are closed. There are some law enforcement and emergency workers on site, but certainly nothing as standard as a park ranger who can answer a question.

People are streaming into the parks, enjoying the free access, but they're finding trash cans overflowing and restrooms locked. Vault toilets are not serviced, and there's hardly a flush toilet to be found anywhere.

At California's Joshua Tree National Park, in particular, conditions are declining.

"Once those port-a-potties fill up there's no amount of cleaning that will save them," said Sabra Purdy. Along with her husband, Seth, she owns the rock-climbing guide service Cliffhanger Guides in the town of Joshua Tree.

**Business Owners And Park Supporters Making Donations**

The 40-year-old Purdy is among dozens of volunteers who have been collecting garbage, cleaning bathrooms and generally keeping an eye on the park. Local business owners and park supporters are donating toiletries and cleaning supplies.

"People are doing it because we love this place and we know how trashed it'll get if we don't," she said.

The partial government shutdown, triggered by the dispute between President Donald Trump and Congress over funding for a U.S.-Mexico border wall, is now well into its second week. There seems to be no resolution in sight.

**Border Security Money But No Funds For Wall**

Democrats took control of the House on Thursday. The House of Representatives is one of two chambers of the U.S. Congress. The other is the Senate, which the Republicans control. House Democrats plan to vote on a bill to open much of the government while denying Trump money for the wall. The president, in a tweet on January 1, rejected the legislation that provides border security money but no funds for the wall.

Trump also invited congressional leaders to the White House on Wednesday, January 2, for a briefing on border security. It was the first sit-down since the shutdown began December 22, though it was unclear if the session could lead to a solution.

One of the most dramatic repercussions of the shutdown arrived January 2. The Smithsonian Institution, having run out of temporary funding, closed all of its museums and the National Zoo.

**"Closed" Parks Essentially Wide Open**

Some parks across the country have remained partially operational with state funding. Government shutdown contingency plans adopted by the National Park Service last year have allowed many national parks to remain accessible, but without staffing. The result is that "closed" parks are essentially wide open, and in some cases that gives them a Wild West vibe.

The Park Service runs a broad group of parks, monuments, battlefields and historic sites. At Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland, the visitor center has a small notice on the front door advising visitors "to use extreme caution if choosing to enter" park property. On the historic Civil War ground, where the Army of the Potomac collided with the Army of Northern Virginia in the bloodiest day in American military history, there is no flag on the flagpole.

The situation keeps changing. Rumors spread on December 31 that Joshua Tree would close the campgrounds, though the Park Service's plan indicates that campers will be allowed to stay and won't be kicked out.

**Harming Fragile Ecosystems**

Some advocates for the parks aren't happy about this situation, fearing that visitors will do permanent damage to the parks and potentially harm fragile ecosystems. They'd like to see the parks fully closed.

At Big Bend National Park in Texas, George Cashman of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, said he was disappointed by the absence of park rangers. Last year, he said, he took his family, including four kids under the age of 10, to Yellowstone, where the kids enjoyed the junior ranger program.

"There are no rangers to talk to and help the kids out. Last year, one of the rangers in Yellowstone let them take the temperature of one of the geysers. Those memories aren't going to happen this year," Cashman said.

Greg Henington is the owner of Far Flung Outdoor Center in Terlingua, a town just outside the park. He said he voted for Trump but blames the president for the shutdown, which he says creates confusion and uncertainty for local businesses.

"This is untenable for small business. We can't make decisions, we lay off employees, we take cancellations," he said.

Even more seriously affected is the Mexican town of Boquillas, which is just across the Rio Grande River from the national park and has always enjoyed a stream of visitors this time of year. However, the border crossing normally staffed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has been closed during the shutdown, and no one is coming or going across the river.

"It has been terrible. We were waiting for our best time of the year," said Lilia Falcon, who owns a restaurant and a bed & breakfast in Boquillas. "It's when we wait and stock up and save the money we make for the rest of the year. Christmas has not been good for us because of the shutdown, but what can we do? Nothing! Nobody will ever hear us."