
Delta County (Colorado) Independent

USFS tight-lipped about rec site closings

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The U.S. Forest Service is being criticized by public lands users locally and nationwide for the lack of public process involved in its Recreational Site Facilities Master Planning (RSFMP) initiative. The Forest Services' secretive approach to the program has left the public confused and suspicious.

Locally, GMUG Forest Supervisor Charlie Richmond has pledged that once the GMUG office completes its review and inventory of recreational sites and gets approval from the regional forester, the public will be involved in the RSFMP process.

Richmond said that will probably take place sometime next month. Public lands advocates will have a full plate in November which is the same month now scheduled for release of the long-delayed GMUG draft forest plan revision.

But the question remains: Will November be too late for public lands users, and for the communities that depend on public lands recreation, to take action and prevent closures of local campgrounds and other recreational facilities?

Horns of a Dilemma

Local forest managers find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. "This has become quite an issue nationally," says Richmond.

On one side is the national Forest Service bureaucracy mandating that a recreation site inventory and master plan document be drawn up on each national forest.

On the other side are public users of national forest recreational facilities who want information, who want to participate in the process, and who want to stop the decommissioning of forest recreational sites if they can.

Forest managers are promising more information next month when the draft of GMUG's recreation facilities master plan is scheduled to be made public. But for now, the best indication of what is likely to happen on the GMUG can be found by looking at what has already happened on other national forests.

Oregon and Alaska

Public lands advocates say the Forest Service began its RSFMP process sometime in 2002.

According to the Durango-based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, "The RSFMP guidebook requires that every national forest produce a five-year plan that ranks all developed recreational sites. The rankings are being used to determine which sites the agency will decommission (i.e. permanently close), which sites will be turned over to concessionaires, and which sites will charge new fees."

Twenty-two national forests have completed their RSFMP. The remaining 133 forests, including the GMUG, are scheduled to have their's approved by Washington sometime next year.

According to the No-Fee Coalition, "Implementation of the RSFMP has already begun on some forests. The White River National Forest has removed toilets and other facilities at Green Mountain Reservoir despite local opposition and without releasing their RSFMP plan."

Of the 212 developed recreational sites on the huge Deschutes National Forest in Oregon, only 14 are free use. The rest are fee sites, run by private concessionaires, or will be decommissioned, The No-Fee Coalition reports. The Coalition adds that the Tongass National Forest in Alaska plans to close or decommission 18 percent of its 312 developed sites under its RSFMP.

Possible cuts discussed on the GMUG run even higher – as many as 100 or more out of the total 138 developed recreational sites there.

NEPA Issues

Public lands advocates say the Forest Service is violating its own rules by not subjecting its RSFMP process to requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

NEPA requires that certain actions of federal agencies be subject to a public review process.

Public lands advocate and former Forest Service planner Dick Artley of Idaho says, “NEPA is required on a case-by-case basis if policies result in any ground-disturbing work. The NEPA process has not been applied to any work (now) being done to obliterate (i.e. bulldoze) developed recreational sites.”

The public has had no input into the RSFMP process, and neither has Congress, Artley says. “The Forest Service has chosen to ignore NEPA.”

Locally, Artley’s view is confirmed by Ouray District Ranger Tammy Parker who told a meeting of the Public Lands Partnership in Montrose, “There is a debate nationally whether the RSFMP is subject to the NEPA process. Actually it (RSFMP) is an administrative program. NEPA is time consuming and costs money to do. The need for it is questioned by the agency itself.”

Dollars Don’t Make Sense

Robert Funkhouser, president of the No-Fee Coalition, says the Forest Service secretly plans to close or decommission 3,000 to 5,000 developed recreational sites nationwide. He adds that another 4,000 will be converted to fee sites or leased to concessionaires.

“There should be at least \$143 million for developed recreational site operations and maintenance, or about \$1 million per forest if distributed equally,” Funkhouser said.

“Yet the Deschutes (Oregon) National Forest’s RSFMP claims to have an unbelievably low \$149,000 in Congressionally appropriated funds for its 212 developed rec sites. The GMUG has presented the figure of (\$134,000) as all that is available to manage its 138 developed rec sites.”

Money to manage developed recreation sites is missing, Funkhouser says. “Internal Forest Service budgets are not generally public information, and the General Accounting Office has repeatedly criticized the inaccuracy of the Forest Service’s public fiscal reports. So it is difficult if not impossible to follow the money. What is clear is that the Forest Service bureaucracy, not Congress, is starving the recreation budgets of the individual national forests.”