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Coalition of recreation and environmental groups condemns U.S. Forest Service proposal to reduce or close facilities, citing Forest Service hidden agenda

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In the wake of U.S. Forest Service recommendations to reduce or close certain facilities on the Allegheny National Forest, a coalition of recreation and environmental groups has condemned the proposals, claiming the Forest Service has a hidden agenda.

The coalition, comprised of the Tionesta Valley Snowmobile Club, Allegheny Defense Project, Friends of Rimrock and Allegheny Outdoor Adventures, claims the Forest Service wants to close recreation areas like Tracy Ridge to ease access for oil and gas companies, a claim Forest Service officials deny.

"What we are seeing is the systematic dismantling of recreation opportunities in the Allegheny," said Ryan Talbott, ADP's forest watch coordinator. "By closing campgrounds and other recreation facilities across our national forest, the Forest Service paves the way for oil companies to drill in these areas."

Talbott added that if certain facilities are closed then tourists won't visit those areas anymore and they won't notice the facilities are being transformed into oil fields.

Talbott is attacking the Forest Service Recreational Facilities Analysis, which is a nationwide effort by Forest Service officials to "assist Forests in creating a sustainable program that aligns recreation sites with visitors' desires, expectations, and use," according to the Forest Service Web site. In short, the Forest Service is trying to cut spending by consolidating services, while maintaining a forest's "niche" — the reason people visit a specific national forest.

In the RFA, officials from the Allegheny National Forest recommended 10 sites within the Bradford Ranger District for partial or complete decommissioning. These sites include, among others: Dewdrop Recreation Area, Timberdoodle Flats Trailhead and Tracy Ridge Recreation Area.

In defending the Forest Service decision to decommission the proposed sites, Anthony Scardina, Bradford district ranger, said difficult decisions had to be made in order to trim the fat from the ANF.

"I believe these choices will allow us to focus more dollars on priority sites," he wrote in his White Paper, a document explaining the thought process behind the recommendations. "It is likely that we will continue to have flat or reduced budgets to provide these services. The result is the need to set priorities for our recreation program and focus our finite resources on those priorities."

Scardina's priorities boil down to increasing recreational sites along the Kinzua Reservoir, reducing sites within the same vicinity that offer similar opportunities and eliminating sites with "severely" low occupancy levels.

But, John Stoneman of Allegheny Outdoor Adventures argues that fewer visitors is a reflection of poor ANF maintenance.

"The reason the Forest Service is registering lower visitation rates is partly because it does not perform the most basic maintenance of existing infrastructure," he said. "There have already been several times this summer that the restroom facilities at the Rimrock Overlook and Picnic Area were without the basic necessity of toilet paper."

According to Forest Service officials, flat-rate federal funding, or decreased federal funding, is not enough to keep up with the maintenance demands of the ANF. By closing or decommissioning the proposed areas within the Bradford Ranger District, the ANF would save a reported 61 percent, \$109,309, on its annual operating cost; 70 percent, \$325,887, on its annual maintenance cost; and 47 percent, \$2,546,072, on deferred maintenance costs. Deferred maintenance costs are expenses associated with repairs or major maintenance of a facility such as roof repair or wastewater facility upgrades. By closing the facilities in the worst conditions, ANF can eliminate the costs needed to improve them to quality standards.

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Mohney assured that no decisions have been made yet. "The Recreation Facilities Analysis is not a decision-making process; it's an analytical process," she said.

If the recommendations are adopted, a "five-year Program of Work" will begin to transform the recommendations into reality.

Mohney refuted the claim that oil and gas exploration had anything to do with the recommendations in the RFA.

"The criteria used to make recommendations was strictly from a recreational standpoint," she said.