

August 29, 2006

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**RECREATION SITE FACILITY MASTER PLANNING:
A Secret Forest Service Policy That Will Close Thousands Of
Recreation Sites And Add Thousands More Fee Sites On The National
Forests**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The light of day is beginning slowly to shine on a new Forest Service program that could result in drastic changes to National Forest recreation.

Since at least 2002, the USDA-Forest Service has been secretly implementing an internal policy initiative called Recreation Site Facility Master Planning, or RSFMP, that threatens to impose a for-profit model on the management of America’s National Forests. RSFMP creates management incentives that will result in the closure of thousands of dispersed and remote recreation sites. These are sites favored by local residents, hunters, fishermen, and other citizens who prefer the dispersed and undeveloped recreation opportunities historically offered on National Forests.

RSFMP mandates that every National Forest inventory all its developed recreation sites and compare their facilities to a National Required Standard. The National Required Standard was created by taking a poll of Forest Service managers, with individual Regions allowed to set their standards higher than the national minimum. No public input was sought. Many simple recreation sites do not meet the standards. The RSFMP Process Guidebook is blunt:

“If a site cannot be operated to at least meet the regionally required standards, it must be closed.” (Page 5)

In at least one Forest, 72% of recreation sites are slated for closure.

The RSFMP Process Guidebook requires that every Forest produce an “RSFMP 5-Year Plan” that ranks all sites. The rankings are being used to determine which sites the agency will close or decommission, which sites will be turned over to concessionaires and which

sites will charge new fees. These RSFMP 5-Year Plans have been produced behind closed doors since 2002 and have not gone through the public comment procedure specified by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

According to information obtained by the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, 22 Forests have completed their RSFMP 5-Year Plans and had them approved by the Forest Service's Washington Office. The remaining 133 Forests are set to have their 5-Year Plans approved sometime in early FY2007. Neither the approved Plans nor the draft Plans have been released to the public. Several Forests have already begun closing sites, in advance of public release of their Plans and even, in some cases, in advance of approval by the Washington Office.

The RSFMP Process Guidebook mandates that all recreation sites become “Sustainable” (i.e. profitable) and have a “Marketable Niche.” Those that cannot pay their way will be decommissioned, (defined in the Guidebook as “obliterated”), or simply closed and gated. One Forest Service Recreation Manager summed up the new semi-for-profit recreation program best: “We are being told that our developed sites must pay for themselves or we are going to get rid of them.”

RSFMP has been going on in parallel with public processes currently underway on many Forests to produce new Travel Management Plans and new Forest Management Plans. Those Plans are being subjected to a full NEPA review and comment process, but the local governments and residents participating are not being told about the concurrent RSFMP planning process.

Projections based on information from five National Forests that has been obtained by the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition show that the agency plans to close or decommission between 3,000 and 5,000 developed recreation sites and convert as many as 4,000 of the remaining sites to either fee-based or private for-profit operation. The RSFMP also calls for other drastic management changes such as reduced operating seasons, turning sites over to non-profits, removal of amenities (toilets, fire rings, picnic tables), and removal/elimination of drinking water systems.

The RSFMP was never authorized by Congress and has never seen Congressional oversight. The policy itself, the new recreation site standards, the individual Forest 5-Year Plans and specific management actions have all been developed behind closed doors. Despite legal requirements that management actions on public lands that alter the human condition or create severe economic impacts to local communities be subjected to public review under NEPA, the Forest Service has no plans to do so. Implementation of site closures has already begun with little or no public notice, and no public review.

The RSFMP program is going to send shockwaves through National Forest gateway communities nationwide. As fee-free sites are closed and fee sites increase in number and cost, Forest visitation (already in decline) will certainly shrink. Local, often rural, communities that are adjacent to or surrounded by National Forest will see a drop in visitation that will damage their economies. The removal of toilets and drinking water

systems will have negative impacts on public health that will have to be addressed at the state, county, or municipal level. Local governments will face additional financial burdens when faced with the threat that recreation sites will close unless they either take over their management or find volunteers or non-profit groups to do so. Economically disadvantaged citizens will find themselves ever more excluded from the recreational opportunities that have traditionally been available to them on National Forests.

The RSFMP threatens to shut out the American public from substantial areas of public land and to convert what remains open to a for-profit model based on access and use fees. If implementation of RSFMP is allowed to continue, most Forest Service developed recreation sites will be run by concessionaires, will require fees, or will be decommissioned or closed.

SITE CLOSURES ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY OR IMMINENT ON SEVERAL FORESTS

While none of the RSFMP 5-Year Plans have been released to the public, the WSNFC has been able to obtain complete Plans from two Forests (the Deschutes and Tongass) and partial information about three more. This information indicates that more-popular forests will see a sharp increase in fee areas with a smaller number of site closures, while less-visited forests will have a large number of sites closed or decommissioned. Decommissioning means physical removal and obliteration of all site facilities, including roads, cabins, toilets, picnic tables, fire rings, and drinking water systems.

The Deschutes National Forest in Oregon is one of the most popular National Forests. It has 212 developed recreation sites, of which 94 are already fee sites and 83 are under concessionaire (private for-profit) management. Under their RSFMP 5-Year Plan the Deschutes will close or decommission 23 sites, turn 18 sites into fee areas, and turn 8 more sites over to concessionaires, leaving only 14 free developed recreation sites on the entire Forest, less than 6% of the total. Additionally, the Deschutes plans to reduce the operating season at 113 sites.

On the largest National Forest, the Tongass in Alaska, there are 312 developed recreation sites, including many historic cabins and fire lookouts available for overnight rental. The cabins and lookouts are especially popular with local residents. According to their RSFMP 5-Year Plan, the Tongass has slated at least 56 sites (18% of the total) for closure or decommissioning. Almost half of those, 25 sites, are historic cabins or fire lookouts. Additionally, the Tongass has undertaken a study to determine which sites currently operated by the Forest Service should be turned over to private, for-profit concessionaires.

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests in western Colorado, which are jointly managed and known as the GMUG (“gee-mug”), have 138 developed recreation sites. Under the RSFMP, the Forest Service hopes to turn a popular Visitor Center on Grand Mesa over to the private sector. If that effort is successful, they will close or decommission “only” 50 developed recreation sites. If they are unable to give

away the Visitor Center then they will be closing or decommissioning 100 developed sites-72% of all sites!

Implementation of the RSFMP has already begun on some Forests. For example, the GMUG has started bulldozing campgrounds, removing toilets, capping drinking water systems, closing picnic areas, and turning day-use areas over to concessionaires without releasing, or even acknowledging the existence of, their RSFMP 5-Year Plan. The White River National Forest in Colorado has removed toilets and other facilities at Green Mountain Reservoir despite local opposition, and without releasing their RSFMP Plan.

WHO IS REALLY DE-FUNDING OUR RECREATION PROGRAM?

The Forest Service cites plummeting recreation budgets as the impetus and justification for RSFMP. But a serious reality gap exists between what the Forest Service is claiming is available to the Forests in the way of appropriated funds from Congress for developed recreation and what Congress is actually appropriating. Here's why:

Congressional funding for Forest Service developed recreation falls under two separate appropriation line items: Facility Maintenance/Capital Improvement, and Operations (listed as Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness, or RHW).

According to the FY2006 Interior and Related Appropriations Conference Report, the Facility Maintenance/Capital Improvement line item for FY2006 was \$108 million. The appropriators did two things to help augment that funding. One was to allow the Forest Service to sell some unneeded off-Forest administrative facilities, approximately \$30 million dollars worth. The other allows the agency to pull \$35 million from non-recreation programs to use for recreation facilities. With these additional funds, Facility Maintenance and Capital Improvement projects have access to appropriated funding of about \$173 million.

The RHW (or Operations) budget covers actual operations for the agency's recreation program. Appropriations for RHW in FY2006 are \$260 million. (Note that Trails and Roads is a separate line item.)

This makes the total appropriated by Congress in FY2006 for Forest Service recreation facilities and programs \$433 million.

Even assuming a generous two-thirds allocation to overhead such as administrative costs and salaries, there should be at least \$143 million dollars for developed recreation site operations and maintenance, or slightly less than \$1 million per National Forest if evenly distributed across the system. Yet the Deschutes National Forest's RSFMP 5-Year Plan claims to have an unbelievably low \$149,000 in Congressionally appropriated funds to manage its 212 developed recreation sites. Likewise, the GMUG has presented the figure of \$138,000 as all that is available to manage its 138 developed recreation sites.

If the extremely low numbers given by the Deschutes and GMUG were projected across the whole National Forest system, the agency would only be allocating approximately \$22 million of their \$143 million appropriation to the individual Forests for their developed recreation programs. So where is the other 85% of the Forest Service recreation appropriation actually going? Internal Forest Service budgets are not generally public information, and the GAO has repeatedly criticized the inaccuracy of the Forest Service's public fiscal reports, so it is difficult, often impossible, to "follow the money." What is clear is that it is the Forest Service bureaucracy, not Congress, which is starving the recreation budgets of the individual National Forests.

POLICY, NOT BUDGETS, IS PUSHING RSFMP

It is important to keep in mind that Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth mandated the RSFMP approach of "Sustainability or closure" for developed recreation sites. It is agency policy that is pushing the de-funding of recreation budgets, not the reverse. In 2002, Chief Bosworth mandated the RSFMP policy of making recreation self-sufficient, and there are indications that the agency was working on this as far back as 2000.

The Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring System shows that nearly 60% of all Forest use is local (within 50 miles) and that

"Sixty-two percent of all National Forest site visits occur in undeveloped areas of the Forests and Grasslands (4 percent in designated wilderness and 58 percent in undeveloped nonwilderness areas). Undeveloped, unconfined (unmanaged) recreation is one of the Chief's identified threats."

As implementation of the RSFMP unfolds, it is becoming increasingly clear that RSFMP is intended to be the vehicle for reducing or eliminating undeveloped and dispersed recreation, the very kind of recreation favored by almost two-thirds of visitors. Chief Bosworth has identified this type of use as a threat. Those less developed, more remote, and dispersed sites and areas are the ones that are unprofitable and subject to closure.

CONCLUSION

The Recreation Site Facility Master Planning program affects every one of the 155 National Forests. It is a major change in public land management policy that was created behind closed doors. The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition calls on its members and affiliated groups, as well as all citizens who use and value our National Forests to demand the following three actions:

- By law, the management actions mandated by RSFMP should go through the NEPA process and have a public comment period, but the Forest Service is implementing them simply by public "notification," often merely by posting a closure notice at the site itself. RSFMP 5-Year Plans are supposed to be approved by Forest Service headquarters in Washington DC, but some Forests have begun implementation without that approval. That is unacceptable. This major change in public land policy must not be implemented without public participation. ***Every Forest should immediately release their RSFMP 5-Year Plan for public review and comment as specified in NEPA.***

- Congress did not initiate, was not consulted about, and did not approve the RSFMP program. ***The responsible Committees in the House and Senate should immediately hold oversight hearings to consider whether RSFMP is in conformity with Congressional intent.***
- There is a huge gap between what Congress has appropriated for Forest Service recreation programs and what is actually making its way to local land managers. ***A GAO audit of Forest Service recreation appropriations compared to recreation spending, for at least the past five years, should be undertaken and completed before any further implementation of RSFMP.***

RSFMP is being implemented right now without public or Congressional input. Heavy equipment is poised right now to remove campgrounds, cabins, picnic tables, fire rings, toilets, and drinking water systems from National Forests nationwide.

Citizens and the media must act quickly by contacting their local Forest officials and demanding public release of RSFMP 5-Year Plans and a public comment period under NEPA (not merely public notification) prior to any implementation. Citizens need to contact their elected officials to demand an audit of Forest Service recreation budgets and increased Congressional oversight.

REFERENCES [Updated October 2008]

Copies of the completed RSFMP 5-Year Plans that have been obtained by the WSNFC are posted at <http://westernslopenofee.org/index2.php?newsdisplay=yes&newsid=3>

Summary tables of proposed changes by Region and a summary table of all Regions are posted at <http://westernslopenofee.org/index2.php?newsdisplay=yes&newsid=14>

The RSFMP Process Guidebook is no longer available on the Forest Service website, but copies can be requested from wsnofee@gmail.com