



Working to Protect Native Species and Their Habitats

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May 30, 2008

Rick Hudson
Supervisor's Office
Black Hills National Forest
1019 N. 5th Street
Custer, SD 57730

Re: Public Comments on Recreation Facility Analysis

Dear Mr. Hudson:

The following comments are being made in response to the press release issued May 7, 2008, advising of the opportunity to have input into the Recreation Facility Analysis process on the Black Hills National Forest.

When the Black Hills National Forest issued its press release for the Recreation Facility Analysis on May 7, 2008, it referred readers to additional information on the Forest Service website. One of the documents on the website was the "Questions & Answers" factsheet. Question 28 asked when the RFA would be finalized and the response was, "After the public has had at least 30 days to submit comments, and after Forest officials have reviewed and considered those comments and incorporated any changes. . . ." The deadline for submitting public comments is June 2, 2008, well short of the "at least 30 days" the Forest Service promised. We also point out that the Forest Service made no attempt, so far as we are aware, to notify the usual "interested parties" of the pendency of the project and the opportunity to comment. This organization received no written notice, even though we have been active participants in the decision making process in the Black Hills for nearly 20 years. Is the Forest Service genuinely interested in receiving public input in the RFA process? If so, why weren't notices soliciting public input mailed to interested parties?

The Recreation Facility Analysis—formerly known as Recreation Site Facility Master Planning until it became extremely controversial a few years ago—is a 7 year old Forest Service program. In fact, when the RSFMP was exposed for what it was, the program was temporarily halted by the Chief of the Forest Service in order to undergo intensive internal review and required modifications. One of the key findings of the internal reviewers was that there was not enough public participation and that the public was not adequately informed about the RSFMP process. Apparently, the Forest Service chose not to respond to this finding, as notice of the RFA (RSFMP) analysis on the Black Hills National Forest has not been published in a way which gives actual notice to many who would be quite interested in offering public scrutiny and input.

We object that the public has not been adequately informed about the RFA procedures and how to provide substantive public input; nor has the public been given adequate time to respond. In addition, we note in the press release that some of the projects were expected to be completed by Memorial Day and others by July 4th weekend. If the Forest Service sincerely wants public input in response to its *proposed* plan, why would it be implementing some of the projects before the deadline for public comments has passed. Was the Forest Service being honest when it said it would consider public comments and incorporate changes in response to those comments?

When I opened the U.S. Forest Service's national website the words "100 years of Caring for the **land** and serving **people**" was at the top of the page. That motto captures what is the Forest Service's mission. The Black Hills National Forest (BHNF) has been diligent about "serving people" but its equally important mission of "caring for the land" has, in most cases, taken a secondary role. We had hoped that the Recreation Facility Analysis (RFA) would recognize the importance of caring for the land, but the increasing usage of the Black Hills by motorized recreationists—with the full support and encouragement of the Forest Service—continues to concern us. We are concerned about the trend to reduce facilities for traditional recreationists while funding upgrades to facilities for the benefit of OHV users. Traditional recreationists are being squeezed out in favor of OHV users. Is this for economic reasons? What is the Forest Service's justification for this trend?

The bureaucratic rationale is complicated, but it all boils down to this: each of the more than 16,000 National Forest recreation sites in the country has to demonstrate that it can pay for itself or it will be closed. Not only are facilities being closed, but drastic budget cuts, including a 46% cut in funding for maintenance over the past two years, are forcing National Forests to reduce or eliminate services (such as toilets) at those sites that aren't self-sustaining. The National Forest shutdown is being justified by the need to pour money into the current Administration's "Healthy Forests Initiative," which aims to make forests healthy by cutting down more trees.

Despite the lofty language in the BHNF 5-year Proposed Program of Work released April 29, 2008, its purpose is to reduce the number of maintained recreation sites and to ensure that those sites which remain open will be the least costly to maintain and/or the most profitable to operate. It is about economics, not caring for the land. May we point out that toilets and picnic tables were never installed in National Forests to be moneymakers? Nor were other developed facilities. Developed facility sites provide services to recreationists, but they can also minimize impacts to the land by focusing heavy use in designated areas designed to absorb such levels of use.

We are also disturbed by the fact that the information in the 5-Year Plan is so difficult to decipher and understand. This Plan is not intended for the public to scrutinize and provide public input; it is written in code and presented in a format that is neither easy to understand nor obvious in what it is disclosing. There is no explanation for or discussion of the various charts on Pages 4 through 16. While these charts or tables may be the tools Forest Service personnel work with on a daily basis, they are decidedly not familiar to the general public and require tenacity to decode.

The 5-Year Plan discloses there is a substantial backlog of deferred maintenance for developed facility sites on the Black Hills National Forest. But the chart on Page 5 compares apples to oranges. The "Baseline Condition" of deferred maintenance is \$6,061,943, but this figure does not include deferred maintenance for sites in Category D. The deferred maintenance left after the 5-Year Plan is implemented is (we think) \$3,823,146, but this does not include categories C or D. It seems clear from this chart that even with the proposed fee increases and fewer sites to maintain, there will be inadequate funds available to meet operating and maintenance costs for the facility sites that are retained.

Quite frankly, the Recreation Facility Analysis process and the 5-Year Plan produced through the process are ludicrous. We cannot even begin to describe how utterly ridiculous this process is. The nearly \$13,000 the Forest Service expects to generate from additional fees over 5 years won't even come close to meeting the annual operating and maintenance costs. The Forest Service is closing facilities and services to the public which have, in many instances, served the public for 50 years, thus violating not only the Service's mission to serve the people, but also the mission to care for the land. Yet on the other hand, the Forest Service continues to recklessly approve massive timber sales under the guise of the Healthy Forests Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act; sales each of which cost the Forest Service millions of dollars. For instance, the just-released Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Upper Spring Creek timber sale will cost the Forest Service (and ultimately the taxpayers) **12.4 million dollars**. Put another way, the Forest Service will incur a net revenue loss of \$12.4 million if the Upper Spring Creek Project is implemented. The Norwood timber sale which was approved in the Record of Decision signed May 22, 2007, will cost the Forest Service and taxpayers **9.4 million dollars**. The Mitchell timber sale, **\$6.9 million** under the Preferred Alternative of the Final EIS. These represent just a few of the dozens of huge timber sales approved, or in the NEPA process for approval, in the Black Hills National Forest. How can the Forest Service justify removing picnic tables and toilets for a miniscule savings while it tosses away vast sums of taxpayers' money for the benefit of private commercial interests? There is clearly something wrong with this picture.

The present policy is short-sighted and destructive. Closing facilities, making them prohibitively expensive or making them difficult or impossible to enjoy because of a lack of basic amenities shuts off access to the only recreation many working people can afford. It also has a negative impact on communities near National Forests whose economies depend in part on the dollars that visitors to those forests spend. When the Forest Service was founded more than a hundred years ago, its first chief, Gifford Pinchot, summed up its job as "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run." The current Forest Service mission seems designed to provide the greatest number of dollars to a handful of people in the short run, while engaging in destructive practices what will have long-run consequences for the forest and wildlife.

We disagree with the response made to Question 31 in the Question and Answer factsheet that NEPA work is not required to complete the RFA. This is clearly forest planning and as such, it requires NEPA analysis and assessment before a decision can be made and implementation begun. There will be significant impacts to forest resources from some of the proposed modifications and these impacts must be assessed and disclosed to the public. Even though this proposed plan of work is supposed to cover 5 years, in reality it will be implemented over the

next 15 years. *See* Question 30 in the Questions and Answers. This is the same time frame that forest management plans govern. The RFA is a distinct planning process, implementation of which will occur over a long period of years with significant impacts. NEPA analysis is absolutely necessary. The Forest Service claims that any time “a recreation site is modified, improved or expanded, the public will be notified.” *See* Question 31 of the Questions and Answers. How is this notice to occur? Will the Forest Service use the same methods it has used for notifying the public of the RFA process? If so, we strongly object because adequate notice was not given for the RFA. When the Forest Service as a result receives very little public input on the RFA process due to lack of adequate notice, will it claim that the public isn’t interested in what is occurring on *our* National Forest and proceed to further exclude the public from future involvement? Where is the transparency in this process?

The following comments respond to specific issues with the proposed program of work.

A. Linkage to Ongoing Travel Management Planning

The Black Hills National Forest is currently in the middle of the NEPA analysis for forest-wide travel management planning. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement is due for release soon. Has the Forest Service coordinated these two planning processes? It would appear that some of the proposed actions in the 5-year Program of Work will have direct impacts on travel management planning and, in fact, may constitute an irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources inasmuch as once the RFA is approved and implementation commences, facilities will be removed, upgraded, etc., thus changing permanently the character of some 119 facility sites on the Black Hills National Forest. Implementation of the RFA would also preclude full and adequate consideration of all reasonable alternatives in the Travel Management Planning Environmental Impact Statement, by restricting or eliminating options which the Forest Service would be able to consider.

If, as it appears, the two planning processes are being considered separately, then we object to this. We believe the RFA process should be an integral part of travel management planning and should not be analyzed on a separate planning track.

B. Specific Concerns about Recreation Facility Analysis

1. Emphasis on Wrong Items

We are disturbed that the emphasis of the Recreation Facility Analysis is to provide more OHV usage, downgrade use by traditional recreationists, and disregard the natural environment and forest resources. Nowhere in the 5-year Program of Work is an indication that the Forest Service considered the natural environment and forest resources when making its choices. The consideration driving this analysis is completely economics: what facilities will bring in the most revenue for the National Forest and local economies.

We generally oppose the move from Forest Service-provided services to private commercial operators. Private commercial interests exist for one purpose: to generate a

profit. There is nothing wrong with this in the appropriate place, but that place is not operating these types of recreation facilities on public lands. Operation of recreation facilities should be left to those *whose mission it is to protect and care for the land and who can be held accountable to the public for damage to our public resources.*

Protecting public resources will not be a high priority for private interests looking to make a profit.

We also request that the Forest Service use caution when it proposes to shift management of forest resources to other entities. Where this is best for users and forest resources and the other entity is a responsible partner which will care for the land, there should be no problem. But where the Forest Service is dumping responsibility on others to save a few dollars, we have strong concerns.

2. Loss of Services for the Majority of Users

We are concerned that so many sites that support traditional recreation are either being closed, or the facilities are being greatly reduced in capacity. For example, 11 sites will lose picnic facilities, 14 sites will lose toilet facilities, 2 sites will lose trash receptacles. What will be the actual savings the Forest Service will realize, compared to the inconvenience to the public? Were these factors considered in the analysis process or was it driven entirely by the saving of pennies? Where picnic tables, toilets and trash receptacles are removed, are there other such facilities nearby which will accommodate users?

By our calculation, at least 9 sites will either be converted for OHV users or will be upgraded to better serve OHV users. Why is the Forest Service catering to this segment of forest users when they are the lease of the primary users of the forest and are responsible for major resource damage on the forest? Why is this not being coordinated with the travel management planning process? And what is the justification for increasing capacity for OHV users while reducing capacity for traditional recreationists, if it is not economic? If these sites are designated for OHV use, will all other facilities be designated as non-OHV use in order to provide quiet experiences for traditional recreationists?

Did the Forest Service consider what will happen at the Reuter campground and trailhead when it upgrades the Reuter campground to an OHV facility, adds a horse loop, and converts the Reuter trailhead to a primitive recreation site? We cannot imagine a scenario better designed for intense user conflict in the coming years, and the ultimate losers will be forest resources. We request that the Forest Service take another look at this area.

3. Addition of Primitive Recreation Sites

We generally applaud the addition of primitive recreation sites to the forest and the Forest Service's recognition that this type of recreation experience is important. But when the result of this action is the closing of other developed sites on the forest to save

dollars, we question the sincerity of the Forest Service's intentions. Were these primitive recreation sites proposed solely because they would cost less to maintain than more developed sites? If so, this is troubling.

4. Sites that Were Rated "Zero"

What was the basis for determining that 8 sites rate a "Zero" in the Recreation Sites Priority Ranking Report? We find it hard to believe that these sites either were not used at all or that they were so unacceptable that they should be dismantled. We have to start with the assumption that all developed facilities are placed in a particular place for many reasons, including public usage and demand, and that the level of development was chosen for many different reasons. Why then did these facilities rate a zero? Was it because these sites were never used during the assessment period? If so, did the Forest Service attempt to determine why the sites receive low usage? Was it because there is conflict between different levels of users?

5. Addition or Increase of Fees

We note that at 6 facility sites a new fee will be imposed, while at 2 other sites fees will be increased. There is not enough information provided in the Program of Work to determine the type of fees and whether or not these fees are appropriate. We oppose recreation fees for general access to public lands. We believe Congress should adequately fund the operation and maintenance of public lands so that access fees are unnecessary. Public lands belong to the people and the public should not have to pay fees to gain access to land we own, including National Forests. In addition, access fees discriminate against working citizens who have no place else to recreate.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input on the Recreation Facility Analysis and 5-year Program of Work. We would appreciate receiving a copy of the final 5-year Program of Work and the decision which approves and implements it.

Sincerely,

Suzanne H. Lewis
Conservation Advocate

Cc: Senator Mike Enzi
Senator John Barasso
Representative Barbara Cubin
Senator John Thune
Senator Tim Johnson
Representative Stephanie Herseth Sandlin