

Green Mountain users meet Forest Service head-on

By Keely Brown
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HEENEY - The sign in the front of the small room Saturday in the Heene Community Center said it all: "Ground Rules: No yelling, biting, kicking or spitting."

There was a tangible tense feeling in the air as Green Mountain Reservoir area residents showed up en masse for their first public meeting with U.S. Forest Service district rangers since the USFS proposed higher fees, restricted ATV use, and the removal of some facilities at the popular recreation area for next season. So many showed up for the meeting that ten minutes in, the crowd was forced to file into the adjoining firehouse to make room for those still arriving.

The proposed fee changes for Green Mountain recreational sites include a \$10 per vehicle entry charge good for five days, a \$5 vehicle daytime parking charge for trailheads, and a \$5 per vehicle charge for overnight camping.

Rick Newton, district ranger for Dillon Ranger District, was there to take the fire from concerned residents over the proposed fee raises and service cutbacks. He said the Forest Service had already garnered feedback on the proposals from close to three hundred people since the plan was announced at the end of August.

"I understand a lot of people are confused and upset and to be honest with you, so am I," Newton told the audience.

Rich Doak, recreation program manager of the White River National Forest, explained more of the specifics.

"The Forest Service is being tasked to operate our programs in a more business-like manner," he said. "We have less than twenty cents per visitor to manage our recreation programs. In our development sites we've been told they need to pay for themselves, or we need to get rid of them."

After citing widespread cuts, which include seven developed sites, six campgrounds, and 17 water systems, Doak said that the Forest Service's maintenance and construction budget has been cut by a whopping 41 percent.

Doak attributed the cuts to decisions made in Washington. "Last December, Congress passed fee legislation in the Federal Land Recreation Enhancement Act," he said, adding that the local district rangers were simply following federal orders.

"They're being forced to do a lot of what they're doing here," he said. "As for doing nothing, we can't legally do that. So there's no easy answer."

Public feeling ran particularly high over one issue in particular: the proposed closure of public toilets in the Willows, Cow Creek and Elliot Creek campsites along the reservoir.

Federal regulations currently require that campgrounds have toilet facilities within three hundred feet from campgrounds. Ranger Ken Waugh said that Cow Creek, Elliot Creek and the Willows don't meet those regulations, and it was not economically possible to install more facilities to meet compliance. "It would cost \$35,000 to install a toilet in Cow Creek," he said.

As for maintaining existing toilets, Waugh was equally dismissive. "A single-unit toilet costs

\$1,000 per season just for the personnel to clean it," he explained. "Then add \$400 for toilet paper, and \$1,400 for maintenance... "

If enacted, the proposed changes would require campers to bring their own portable toilets to campsites. Many people at the meeting voiced concerns that entrusting campers with waste removal would be problematic. When one woman in the room called out, "This will be an environmental disaster," she was met with loud applause.

"I think it's really stupid that they plan to tear the toilets out of the Willows," said Don Scott, a 27-year Heeney resident. "People are gonna come up here and camp and there's not going to be someone up here (to check on compliance), so what's going to happen then?"

Another contentious issue raised was the proposed removal of public fire pits at many sites, requiring campers to provide personal fire pans instead. Like personal toilets, personal fire pans are another expense of several hundred dollars.

Other issues raised included the removal of boat ramps in the area, imposing "quiet hours" in some tourist-congested sites near residences, regulations on ATV and OHV usage, as well as leash laws on dogs. The Forest Service is also proposing the closure of the Prairie Point Campground, due to consistent lack of revenue.

At the end of the meeting, district ranger Newton said that he would be taking comments through at least the middle of November, but that decisions would have to be made and implemented before next summer.

"If you feel strongly that we need another time to meet, then we will," Newton promised.

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