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Closing Heaven? Some Coronado campgrounds may be shut down

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Coronado National Forest officials say any long-term solution to deteriorating campgrounds in the Chiricahua and Huachuca mountain range areas could be mostly in the users' hands.

"The future trends to volunteer work to help these sites as more and more people retire," said Bill Lewis of the Coronado supervisor's office this week. "These areas could be rich in volunteers. It would be foolish if we didn't go that way."

Lewis spoke amid rumors that five free campgrounds were slated to permanently close this year, and the two largest Chiricahua grounds, Rustler Park and Rucker Canyon, would later be in the bulldozer's path. The Chiricahua Mountains have routinely been identified by campers and hikers as some of the most beautiful and remote scenery in Arizona.

"Nothing is finalized," said Celeste Gordon, recreation planner of the Sierra Vista National Forest office. "Some campgrounds have been closed seasonally as usual, and Rustler Park has no personnel there in the winter. There have been rumblings about closure, but everything will be decided by a (Recreational Facility) Master Plan now going on. After the process, certain campgrounds may fall to the bottom of the priority list. Rumors fly and there could be closures."

"We are very much in favor of the volunteer idea, though. We love the idea of camp hosts. I want people to feel free to call my number with their input."

Lewis said closures are an option, but "everything now is on the table."

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"The only constraint to all this is the imagination," he said. "We have to get down and look at the objectives. That's all I can say."

Coronado officials and volunteers say the basic problem is no secret - lack of money, which leads to lack of personnel to work on campgrounds, which leads to deterioration.

John Payne of Hereford, who has been an area Forest Service volunteer for a year, said he has heard from a "reliable source" that slated to close are Ramsey Vista, in the Huachucas; Parker Canyon Lake's Rock Bluff group campground; Pinery Canyon, in the Chiricahuas near the Wonderland of Rocks; and Herb Martyr and John Hands in the scenic Cave Creek area of the east Chiricahuas, an international birding haven.

All of these areas are free. Ramsey Vista and Pinery Canyon close each winter because of cold weather at high altitudes.

Payne, a native of the area, said closing campgrounds can cause environmental problems.

"If they shut down, people move to the forest, and now it's getting to be more people and less campgrounds," he said, adding there also is a serious aesthetic problem with the campgrounds.

"Sad state of repair," Payne said. "They are not getting the maintenance. Last October we ran into a ranger at Rustler Park who was going to shut it down then. A friend of mine and I volunteered to keep it open. Before that it had the water shut off, and there were hot campfires left (unattended) after people left.

"At Herb Martyr, toilets are rusted out and the floors are covered with urine. It's a real sad thing."

Most national forest recreation is funded by federal dollars appropriated by Congress, Gordon said, and fees collected at the less remote Chiricahuas and Huachucas campgrounds are not adequate for repair as in the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson.

"Once we have the funding, we can take care of maintenance," she said.

But that, of course, is a big if.

"We are in sympathy with these people," Payne said. With just one or two rangers for an entire range, it's impossible to maintain with the addition of paperwork. They desperately need help.

"I just hope (the officials) don't close these places without notifying the public, then say after the fact, 'Why didn't you speak up?'"

Lewis said there have been efforts to improve popular areas such as Cave Creek.

"Sunny Flat campground has been completely refurbished, all new facilities and moved a bit away from the creek," Lewis said. "It fills up this time of year because of birders."