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Campgrounds face closure

By BRODIE FARQUHAR
Star-Tribune correspondent

LANDER -- Tucked away in a corner of the U.S. Forest Service Web site are plans and documents which could lead to the closure of hundreds of campground water systems and ultimately, hundreds of campgrounds themselves throughout the national forest system.

The time-hallowed practice of fetching water from a hand pump -- for preparing meals, washing dishes or washing dirty kids -- may become a thing of the past. Like a small-town post office, where people meet and talk, the campground hand pump is where campers meet and talk, forming friendships that can last a weekend or a lifetime.

That could all disappear in a few years, said primitive recreation advocate Scott Silver, executive director of Wild Wilderness in Bend, Ore.

What would replace those basic water systems and campgrounds?

According to Silver, they'd be replaced by fewer, but bigger developed campgrounds, featuring more expensive and complicated water systems, operated by for-profit concessionaires.

"It is all there on the Internet," said Silver, referring to the "Recreation Site Facility Master Planning" Internet page that details the information.

Silver said he is convinced that federal land agencies including the Forest Service are being deliberately starved by the Bush administration's tax cuts and big budget deficits. The Forest Service's recreation facility planning, he said, is designed to have each forest define for itself a recreational "niche" that will then out-compete other recreation activities for dollars and staff support, with the losers withering away. Recreational niches will be dominated by for-profit concessionaires, he warns.

According to Silver, conservative congressmen, cash-strapped land managers and recreation industry leaders are working cooperatively to create an entirely new land management ethos. Their efforts are being directed toward maximum "commercialization, privatization and motorization" of federal lands. The name best used to describe their vision for the 21st century and beyond, he said, is "industrial-strength recreation."

"In evaluating recreation facilities, Forest Service staff are instructed to look very closely at water and sanitation issues as an excuse or justification for closure," Silver said. Nowhere in the master plan is there any mention of catching up on deferred maintenance with higher appropriations from Congress or fees from the public.

"Forest Service leaders just want to shut those facilities down," Silver said.

Vera Smith, conservation director for Colorado Mountain Club, said the Forest Service made a huge investment in recreation infrastructure over the past 50 years.

"I think it is crazy to allow that investment to languish and decay," Smith said. "My approach is to lobby Congress for funds to rescue those facilities."

Alternative view

While Silver leans toward a conspiracy theory, Andy Stahl of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics said he believes bureaucratic incompetence and changing demographics

can best explain what's happening in the nation's forests.

"I call it 'revenge of the planners,'" said Stahl, referring to bureaucrats who push paper rather than do anything in the field. He said it shouldn't be that challenging to place a picnic table and a toilet in the woods.

"The reality is that the Forest Service has been trying to close campgrounds since the camping heyday in the '50s and '60s," Stahl said. Driving to a campground and pitching a tent has been replaced by 30-foot RVs that haul ATVs on a trailer and demand full utility hookups. Campers are more likely to entertain themselves with ATVs, motorbikes, video games and satellite television than by hiking, fishing or just messing around in the outdoors, he said.

The Forest Service's own "National Visitor Use Monitoring" report, released last fall, backs Stahl's theory.

"NVUM results have challenged some common perceptions about recreation visitation patterns," the report says. "On many (national forest) lands the bulk of the recreation budget is used to maintain overnight and developed facilities. Yet nationally, only 8 percent of visits include spending the night ... in developed campgrounds. Only about one-third of national forest site visits occur on developed day or overnight facilities, and nearly half of these are visits to ski areas. The majority of visitation is actually day use. Day users tend to come to the same forest many times each year and stay for short periods of time. Sixty-two percent of all national forest site visits occur in undeveloped areas of the forest and grasslands (4 percent in designated wilderness and 58 percent in undeveloped non-wilderness areas)."

Forest Service documents also note that:

- * Recreation site deferred maintenance estimates have reached \$346 million.
- * Recreation fees have raised customer expectations.
- * The national forests' ability to charge fees is more restrictive than a previous fee demonstration program and will result in a decrease of dollars available for recreation sites.
- * New Environmental Protection Agency operating standards will increase the number of recreation site water systems failing to meet standards without additional expenditures.
- * Visitor preferences and demand have changed since the 1960s, when most existing recreation sites were designed and constructed.

EPA pressure?

Pam DeVore, the integrated business coordinator for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region, said many campground water systems will be shut down and torn out because the EPA is requiring expensive chlorination, pumping and filtration systems and frequent testing.

"No one has that much money," she said. "It is going to make it more difficult to provide potable water to remote sites."

DeVore acknowledged that there have been no known disease outbreaks in campers drinking from Forest Service wells, but because surface waters interact with groundwater, the Forest Service feels it must take these additional, protective steps.

Yet EPA spokesman Dale Kemery said his agency has done nothing to push the Forest Service in this direction.

"I've found nothing here (to account for it)," Kemery said. "It sounds as if it is driven by the

Forest Service's budget."

DeVore said some Colorado campgrounds lost their water during the recent drought, as water tables dropped.

"It wasn't a big deal for the public," she said. Campers simply brought their own water, and campground use did not go down when the wells were dry, she said.

Other options available under the Forest Service's recreation facility master planning, DeVore said, include:

- * Cutting seasons shorter. Many campgrounds are starkly empty after Labor Day, but they've been kept open longer in the past.
- * Converting day-use sites into campgrounds or vice-versa, depending on local conditions.
- * Installing electrical service into campgrounds or shutting them down.

DeVore said the only forest in the Rocky Mountain Region that has finished the recreation facility planning process -- including approval from the regional forester -- is the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest. Most other forests in the region are waiting for approval from the regional forester, while the Black Hills National Forest is about three-fourths of the way through the process.

Closing campgrounds

Stahl of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics said the agency has figured how to build budgets and staff on timber and firefighting programs, but has never really figured how to do so with recreation. The solution is either make a recreational activity pay for itself with fees, he said, or shut it down.

That's seen clearly in a PowerPoint presentation on the Forest Service Web site, Silver said. He noted that the Forest Service is proposing four tiers of recreational facilities: non-discretionary, open, closed and decommissioned.

"Non-discretionary" means the Forest Service has a private enterprise partner, a concessionaire. "Open" means a facility that pays for itself, while "closed" means that a facility is closed if there is no money to run it. Decommissioned means that it didn't fit within the "niche," or it can be decommissioned if it remains closed for three years in a row.

Silver was also bothered by a "plan first, inform the public later" segment in the online PowerPoint presentation.

"The Forest Service is going to develop these plans first, and then they'll tell you about them," he said.

He said the taxpayer should have a voice in these plans.