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Hundreds of campsites may close

Analysis of cost: A backlog in maintenance led to the proposed cuts. Officials hope private groups adopt some sites.

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Article Last Updated: 11/19/2006 12:35:53 AM MST

Hundreds of campgrounds, picnic areas and other recreation facilities in national forests and grasslands could close under a sweeping U.S. Forest Service cost-cutting exercise.

Every one of the roughly 15,000 campgrounds, trailheads with bathrooms and other developed recreation sites in the 193 million acres under the agency's authority is being evaluated.

The value of each site is being weighed against the costs of maintaining it, federal officials say.

Forest Service officials say they are being forced to juggle priorities as the system faces a \$346 million backlog in maintenance, a growing tab for fire suppression - now 42 percent of expenditures - and an annual budget that was cut 2.5 percent to \$4.9 billion for 2007.

"We are looking at reality here," said Jim Bedwell, the Forest Service's national director of recreation and heritage resources. "We're trying to best focus our

funds as well as look at other ways to operate."

So far, about 10 percent of facilities in 44 national forests that have completed their studies are targeted for decommission or closure.

Each of the 155 national forests and 20 grasslands must complete a recreation-site facility master plan by the end of 2007.

The process calls for recreation facilities to be itemized and ranked in order of their condition, frequency of use and how they fit in the forest's recreation focus, or "niche."

"There is a whole range of potential outcomes ... from closing sites to actually upgrading them," said Steve Sherwood, director of recreation for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region.

The public will have a chance to weigh in once the sites have been selected. Implementation of the plans will take five years, Forest Service officials say.

"Some of the sites being looked at have extremely low occupancy rates, in the 5 to 10 percent range," Sherwood said.

"We recognize there will be people who have strong connections," he said, "but we also know people in Maine and California expect us to take a hard look at those locations because it is their tax dollars going to support these small sites."

Forest Service officials say perhaps local volunteers, civic organizations and private groups could step in and run some of the facilities on the list.

"An enormous change"

Decommissioned campgrounds will still be

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available for camping, but they won't have toilets, trash cans, picnic tables or water systems, Sherwood said.

Critics say the Forest Service is sneaking the process through with little public involvement and the result will be less access to forests and fewer recreational opportunities.

"This is an enormous change for the Forest Service," said Robert Funkhouser, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition.

"What you have here is a policy that mandates all sites are self-sustaining or profitable or they must be closed. ... That's not OK," Funkhouser said.

In the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests, 50 of the forests' 140 recreation amenities will have to close or be modified, said Lee Ann Loupe, a Forest Service spokeswoman.

The public will be able to comment on the process, and "nothing is set in stone yet," she said.

The Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest and Pawnee National Grassland managers are starting their processes.

Arapaho-Roosevelt has enough money to operate 64 of its 177 recreation sites - with some others run by concessionaires, said Paul Cruz, forest recreation staff officer.

The White River National Forest plan is nearly complete - identifying 142 inventoried recreation sites. Details about what the forest is planning haven't been announced, Loupe said.

The Pike-San Isabel National Forest and Cimarron-Comanche National Grassland will begin their recreation site master planning in March, said Barb

Timock, a forest spokeswoman.

One goal of the service's overall plan is to cut the \$346 million maintenance backlog 20 percent by 2010, 70 percent by 2015 and 90 percent by 2020.

Water systems outdated

Another factor driving the review is the need to upgrade campground water systems to meet tougher federal drinking-water standards, officials say.

Most campgrounds were built in the 1960s and are out of date or falling apart, the Forest Service's Bedwell said.

"There has been a lot going on in the 40 years since then - there is more people, shifts in population, a diverse mix of visitors, different styles of recreation activities," he said.

Scott Silver, director of the Oregon-based Wild Wilderness, said the Forest Service is placing too much emphasis on cost-cutting and outside groups' taking over facilities.

"It is a way to allow the government to get the job done without using tax dollars," Silver said. "When you starve government of the needed money, you force these other alternatives. You start to make government fail. Americans are becoming used to government failing."

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