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U.S. Forest Facilities May Close

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Funding woes have the federal government considering the potential closure of hundreds of campgrounds and other recreation facilities across the country, a situation officials said makes cooperation with businesses and local governments to fund recreation increasingly important.

A shrinking budget and rising costs have prompted the U.S. Forest Service to evaluate the use, value and cost of about 15,000 campgrounds, picnic areas, trailheads with bathrooms and other developed recreation sites.

"It's good business is one way of looking at this," said Gary Schiff, deputy forest supervisor of Nevada's Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

At Humboldt-Toiyabe, the largest national forest in the lower 48 states, the Forest Service is evaluating the future of about 20 developed recreation sites, Schiff said. That's about 10 percent of the roughly 200 sites across the forest, which covers 6.3 million acres in Nevada and eastern California.

The Forest Service faces a \$346 million backlog in maintenance and its 2007 budget was cut 2.5 percent to \$4.9 million. Costs of fire suppression are growing, worsening the agency's fiscal woes, while another important factor is the need to upgrade campground water systems to comply with tough new federal drinking water standards, officials said.

The Forest Service hopes to cut its maintenance backlog 20 percent by 2010, 70 percent by 2015 and 90 percent by 2020, the Associated Press reported.

About 10 percent of facilities in 44 national forests that have completed studies of recreation facilities have been targeted for closure. Studies focus on the use of a given facility as well as the cost and trouble associated with its maintenance, Schiff said.

"We start looking at what facilities need more attention and which maybe don't have that much use," Schiff said. "Then we look at does this still make sense to have this. We're looking at spending our recreation funding on the greatest good for the greatest number."

The situation makes clear the need to continue cooperative ventures with local governments and the private sector, particularly when it comes to the construction of any new recreation facilities, Schiff said.

"We can't take on new operations and maintenance, that's for sure," Schiff said. "That's the first question -- if you're going to build something new, who is going to take care of it?"

"Here's the catch phrase we have: No partner, no potty."

A number of cooperative ventures for recreation facilities in Northern Nevada are in place or pending. The Nevada Department of Transportation maintains the restroom at the Forest Service's new Mount Rose trailhead. A private snowmobile outfitter handles restroom maintenance and trash pick-up at the popular trailhead at Spooner Summit. Douglas County maintains the Forest Service-owned rafting take-out on the Carson River.

"I want to continue looking for the opportunities to partner wherever we can," said Doug Doolittle, Washoe County's parks director. Washoe County maintains restrooms at the trailheads at Whites and Thomas creek canyons and is joining with the Forest Service for the planned construction of a new visitors center at Galena Creek Park.

With local governments facing some of the same fiscal difficulties as the federal government, joining forces only makes sense, Doolittle said.

"I think we'll find more and more federal and local agencies partnering just because of the necessity to do so," Doolittle said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.