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Closing campgrounds

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Stung by negative press about campground closures, as well as criticism from conservation activists about a lack of public involvement in the process, the U.S. Forest Service says it wants to do better.

"Our aim is to raise the standard for participation and strengthen our work with the public so we can collectively determine the needs for forest recreation facilities and meet future demands," said Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth this week in a letter to regional foresters. "The ultimate goal is to improve recreation opportunities and experiences on national forests."

The agency's recreation site facility master plan looks not only at campgrounds, but also assesses the viability of picnic areas, boat ramps, vehicle pullouts with interpretative signs and trailhead kiosks.

In one of his last acts as chief of the Forest Service, Bosworth has tapped a national review team to gauge the effectiveness of citizen participation in the recreation facility planning process. He charged the national team to conduct a thorough review and make recommendations by April 2.

For the next 60 days, said Joel Holtrop, deputy chief of the Forest Service, no national forest will

make any decisions about what recreational facilities will be closed, kept open or changed to meet public needs.

Asked what was the genesis of the recreation facility planning program, Holtrop said it was an internal initiative, not prompted by Congress or the Bush administration. He acknowledged that in the face of mounting criticism and press attention, it was time to figure out how public participation in the process might be best improved.

Scope of closures

The Forest Service manages about 15,000 camping areas and other recreational sites on 155 national forests and 193 million acres of public lands. The agency is imposing a for-profit model on those sites.

In Oregon's Deschutes National Forest, for example, only 14 out of 212 existing developed recreation sites will remain open and free to public use, according to research by Robert Funkhouser, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition in Colorado. All the rest will be shut down, turned over to concessionaires or kept open as fee sites, he said.

In Colorado, half of the 140 campgrounds and other facilities in the Grand Mesa,

Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests face closure.

Last month, the Denver Post reported that 44 national forests have gone through the recreation facility planning process, and 10 percent of their facilities are marked for decommissioning or closure, with another 175 forests and national grasslands to complete their reviews by the end of 2007. The Post also reported that seven Rocky Mountain region forests in Colorado and Wyoming have submitted plans which call for either closing or reducing services to about 150 sites. The Shoshone National Forest proposes decommissioning 42 sites.

According to Scott Silver, director of the Wild Wilderness conservation group, "The U.S. Forest Service is generating dozens of 'proposed five-year programs of work' which collectively call for the closing, decommissioning and privatizing (of) hundreds upon hundreds of recreation sites and facilities. The process had been on track to shutter, demolish and/or reduce the season of operation for thousands of recreation facilities from coast to coast.

"The process is geared to concentrating access into relatively few, crowded and expensive to visit, facilities," Silver said. "The process calls for doing away with those special places in the forest where one could enjoy uncrowded, minimally developed, camping. The process is one of transforming the great outdoors into a place where recreation is sold to paying customers and where the quest for making a buck off recreation dominates."

Team leader

Beth Pendleton, deputy regional forester for the Pacific Southwest in California, heads the new review team. She said the team members will study what has happened to date regarding public participation, and will also look at all communication methods and avenues, such as public meetings, public notices, postings on the Internet and working with journalists to get the word out.

Holtrop emphasized that recreation facility planning is not a decision process. Rather, it is an analysis tool, and therefore is not subject to the National Environmental Policy Act's environmental impact statement requirement.

Holtrop was asked if individual national forests that have announced facility changes and closures would "have to start over." He said different circumstances would apply to different forests, based on the degree that the public was or was not involved. Holtrop did keep the door open to reversing national forest decisions to close individual recreation facilities.