

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOREST SERVICE KEEPING RECREATION SITE CLOSURE REPORT UNDER WRAPS

Public Process Review Still Not Released Seven Weeks After Completion; Closures Continue

A top-level Forest Service report on the lack of public process in the closure of thousands of recreation sites nationwide is being kept under wraps in Washington, even as the site closures continue. The National Public Participation Review Team, convened by retiring Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth as one of his last official acts, was due to submit their findings by March 30th, but the report has still not seen the light of day.

The Review Team was charged with making recommendations about the Recreation Site-Facility Master Planning (RS-FMP) process. RS-FMP is a policy that threatens to impose a for-profit model on the management of America's National Forests. As one agency official put it, "In our development sites we've been told they need to pay for themselves, or we need to get rid of them." RS-FMP has been widely criticized for failing to include the public in decisions about sweeping recreation site closures.

In a letter dated January 26, 2007 (see:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/rsfmp/2300-7310-rsfmp-public-part-rev-team-formation.pdf>) the Chief ordered the Review Team to begin assessing public

participation activities, methods, products, and results from a cross section of National Forests. He ordered that "The Review Team will submit their findings and recommendations to Deputy Chief Joel Holtrop by March 30."

Since the deadline, the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition has repeatedly asked that the Forest Service's Washington office make the findings of the National Public Participation

Review Team public. Although acknowledging that the recommendations were completed on time, they have yet to release them.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Coalition President Robert Funkhouser. "The Forest Service is preventing the public from seeing a report about their failure to include the public in important decisions about public lands. It's ludicrous."

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition estimates that RSFMP will remove from the Developed Recreation Program, close, or decommission between 3,000 and 5,000 recreation sites. Many of these sites will be gated and no longer accessible. Closures have already begun on some forests, with little or no public notice. So has decommissioning, including the removal of drinking water systems, picnic tables, toilets, and fire rings.

But closure and decommissioning are only one aspect of RSFMP. The policy also calls for turning many sites over to private sector partners to manage. Thousands more are slated for increased fees, new fees, and reduced operating seasons. (See: <http://www.westernslopenofee.org/NoFee/RSFMP.pdf>)

The RS-FMP process has been going on behind closed doors in every National Forest since 2002, and has been being secretly implemented since at least 2006. The Forest Service has so far refused to subject RS-FMP to the federally mandated NEPA process for public comment. At most, they have provided public "notification" that campgrounds and other sites will be closed or have new fees imposed. Most Forests have not released their RS-FMP 5-Year Plans, although more than 55 of the nation's 155 National Forests have completed them.

The Review Team was formed following public and Congressional outcry over recreation site closures and increased reliance on entrance fees without public involvement. (See: <http://baucus.senate.gov/newsroom/details.cfm?id=266110>) Despite Bosworth's order that it be put on hold pending the Review Team's findings, the Forest Service is moving ahead with RS-FMP on Forests across the nation (http://www.oroillemr.com/news/chico/ci_5805705) and all Forests are under orders to complete their RS-FMP plans by the end of 2007.

Every National Forest is required by RS-FMP to inventory and rank every recreation site, from highly developed campgrounds, to picnic areas, to trailheads. RSFMP calls for recreation self-sustainability (profitability), and relies heavily on access fees to achieve that goal. Those fees would replace appropriated funding from existing taxes. A similar process is set to get under way in 2008 for the Forest Service trails program.