



Portions of forest may be closed

Recreation areas lack upkeep funds

By Zeke Barlow

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In an effort to deal with shrinking budgets, Los Padres National Forest is examining ways to cut back on maintenance in the coming years by reducing seasons of use and closing a few recreation areas.

At the same time, the U.S. Forest Service is hoping to improve high-use campgrounds and bring in outside companies to run popular destinations.

"We are looking at less money so we have to find other ways of doing business," said Ken Kunert, landscape architect and recreation planner for Los Padres forest. "The objective is to bring developed recreation programs to a sustainable level."

Across the country, forests are undergoing similar "Recreation Facility Analyses" that critics fear could result in fewer recreation opportunities for the public as well as a privatization of the public resource. The reduced funding comes at a time when Los Padres forest officials expect visitor rates to increase by as much as 50 percent over the next few decades.

The reduction plans are expected to be implemented over five years.

Of 108 developed sites in Los Padres forest, officials are considering closing four and shortening the season of use for 10 others. Some of those slated for closing have existing problems, such as the Ozena campground near Highway 33, which sits in a flood plain. The Hardluck campsite near Gorman has issues with endangered species in the area and has been closed for some time.

Much of the other infrastructure in the forest is getting old and needs repairs, Kunert said.

"Most of the facilities in Los Padres forest were built in the 1950s and '60s, and they wear out, and we have this huge backlog of things that need to be repaired and replaced," he said.

Under the proposed schedule, the cost of maintenance has been reduced by about 65 percent, from \$265,616 to \$93,285. Closing some sites and reducing use at others, reduces the amount of deferred maintenance, that which needs to be done but doesn't necessarily have funding.

The costs for deferred maintenance would drop about 40 percent, from \$5,259,898 to \$3,132,573.

The locations slotted for reduced services are in more remote locations that don't get as much traffic, Kunert said. The plan includes expanding services in some areas that are more popular, including the Rose Valley Campground near Ojai, which could get an additional 35 campsites on top of the existing nine. Spending less on older, less used areas, allows the agency to concentrate on the more popular ones, he said.

Outside companies could be brought in to run popular campgrounds, pushing some of the costs out of the government and into private businesses.

It's a trend some critics say could hurt not only Los Padres forest but also national forests around the country.

"They don't have much money, but they do hold these facilities in the public trust," said Alasdair Coyne, conservation director for Keep Sespe Wild. "I understand that they don't have many choices, but rather than just saying, We don't have the money,' they could be requesting higher budgets."

He fears what happens when private companies start running portions of public land, in part because it could come with increased costs.

Kunert said no new fees are expected from the Forest Service, although it is unknown what effect a concessionaire may have.

"It's a shame so many of our favorite places are proposed for closure," said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of Los Padres ForestWatch.

"People who enjoy recreation in our forest should let our members of Congress know that closing our backcountry sites is not acceptable."



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