

## **The Southern (Illinois)**

**February 18, 2008**

### **Shawnee forest hosts meeting on proposed fees**

*BY BECKY MALKOVICH, THE SOUTHERN*

GOREVILLE - Linda Kesul fears the worst for her small business if recreational fees and hikes are imposed as proposed in the Shawnee National Forest.

"I may as well shut the doors," she said.

Kesul owns Bay Creek Ranch in Simpson, a campground with lodging that was originally set up for horses and their riders, but now caters to a variety of clientele including hunters, bicyclists, hikers and tourists.

Kesul said high gas prices and the economy have already slowed business and the fees and increases proposed by the U.S., Forest Service could deal her business a death blow.

"It's just too much money, combined with all the other expenses. It's going to hurt all the small businesses in Pope County," she said. "It seems the decisions the forest service makes do not take into account the impact on the communities and small businesses in the area."

Kesul was one of about 85 people who attended an informational meeting Monday night at the Southern Illinois Equine Barn in Goreville.

Organizer and speaker Michael Scott explained his opposition to the fees, which will include a \$5 per car, per day use charge at forest sites such as Pounds Hollow picnic and beach area and Garden of the Gods interpretive and picnic area and a \$5 a day fee, or \$50 per year, for equestrian use of designated trails.

An increase in campground fees is also proposed for some sites including Pine Ridge Campground, which would see a rise in fees from \$5 to \$12.

The forest service has said fees and increases are needed to maintain and continue recreational uses in the forest. Attempts to reach the forest service were unsuccessful Monday.

Scott said he was asked if he wouldn't be "preaching to the choir" by making his remarks to a crowd made up of horse enthusiasts, hikers and business owners who serve visitors to the forest.

"You're going to learn some new songs," he said.

Scott then asked how many people in the audience trust the forest service.

"Well, we've got one," he said of the sole audience member who raised a hand. "It's not the fees so much as the trust. Lots of people say they wouldn't mind giving if they knew the money would go to the trail, but they don't trust the forest service to do that."

Past surveys of equestrian use in the forest produced numbers that were "staggering," Scott said, between 38,000 and 40,000 riders in 2003 alone.

One survey estimated the total economic impact from horse camping in 2003 at \$16 million.

"It's a huge, huge industry," Scott said.

If the proposed fees and hikes are approved, he said, Southern Illinois stands to lose tourism dollars to other places where fees aren't quite so high.

For example, he said equestrians who visit Land Between the Lakes are charged \$60 per trailer whereas "If the same family comes to the Shawnee National Forest, they'll pay \$200 a year."

Opponents of the proposed fees have gathered more than 1,200 signatures on petitions and are asking that those interested send their thoughts on the proposal by April 15 to Recreational Advisory Committee, c/o Region 9, Regional Office, 626 E. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI or to Michael Scott, 60 Hill Top Lane, Simpson, IL 62985. Scott will deliver the comments in person when he travels to Wisconsin to present petitions and public comments to the forest service.