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Forest Service plan to close some sites will save \$140,000 per year

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WENATCHEE — The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest is proposing to remove bathrooms and other structures at several of its recreation areas, permanently close about a half-dozen campgrounds and increase user fees at dozens of sites in the next five years. The U.S. Forest Service agency released a draft report Friday of a two-year analysis of all 359 developed recreation sites in the two forests. Faced with shrinking federal funding for maintaining recreation sites, the report recommends an action plan for reducing costs across the sprawling forests, which cover four million acres from the Canadian border south to Yakima.

"As in so many places, operating budgets have been flat or are declining while operating costs have been increasing," Becki Heath, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest supervisor, said in a prepared statement. "Recreation use has been on the rise, yet the decades old facilities are aging. Many are in need of basic maintenance or improvements." The two forests have a backlog of \$3 million in repair or replacement work that has been deferred because of a lack of funding, said project manager Amy Tinderholt. Implementing the proposed actions would not only erase the backlog of repairs within five years but also save the two forests about \$140,000 a year — or about 20 percent of their annual operation and maintenance costs for recreation sites, she said.

"We feel really good that the areas we are proposing to close or remove facilities from are remote sites that are not receiving much maintenance right now," Tinderholt said. "This plan will help us focus our budget on those area where the public would really like to see improvements."

The agency is also proposed to modernize several sites by replacing wooden outhouses and picnic tables with newer structures that are less expensive to maintain, she said.

The draft proposal includes:

- Closing or decommissioning 11 sites, including Graham Harbor and Grouse Mountain campgrounds on the Chelan Ranger District and Meadow Creek Campground in the Wenatchee River Ranger District.

Removing bathrooms, picnic tables and other facilities at two dozen campgrounds and trailheads.

Adding new fees at six sites, increasing fees by \$4 to \$5 at 54 sites, and enforcing fee compliance at another 63 sites.

Switching to a concessionaire system at 11 campgrounds.

Replacing or repairing aging structures at 83 sites.

Most of the actions would be implemented between 2010 and 2012

Tinderholt said most of the campgrounds that would be closed and decommissioned are already closed to the public. For example, Graham Harbor Campground on Lake Chelan has been closed for a few years because of fire damage, and Meadow Creek Campground has been closed for several years.

She said there should be no big surprises for people when they see the list of proposed actions. The agency is not proposing to reduce services in the most popular sites, and plans to make improvements in many of those places.

For example, in the Icicle Valley southwest of Leavenworth, the forest is proposing to replace aging bathrooms and other facilities at Bridge Creek, Chatter Creek and Eightmile campgrounds, put in a new bathroom at the Eightmile Lake trailhead and a new sign at the Fourth of July trailhead.

She added that by completing the analysis of all its recreation sites, the two forests are now eligible to apply for up to \$2 million in federal grants to repair and replace old and deteriorating structures.

The public will have an opportunity to comment on the proposed changes until June 9. The Forest Service plans to finalize the work plan by June 30.

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