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Forest Service campground proposals meet objections

By KERRI REMPP, Record staff writer

After relative silence, the public finally spoke out in opposition to the Forest Service's ideas on how to handle campgrounds and trailheads in the Pine Ridge District. Nearly 60 individuals made an appearance at a four-hour open house last week to express their disapproval after less than a handful had shown up at the first meetings on the subject.

"They are public lands that belong to me and all other Americans," said Jim Lees, a retired Forest Service employee. He continued by saying that the Forest Service, as his management team, has failed to meet his expectations by proposing such things as closing water systems, removing restrooms and decommissioning campsites.

"In conclusion I would give my management team an F," he said.

The Recreation Facility Analysis is a process every forest in the country must complete by December of this year. The Nebraska unit had to prepare options to deal with facilities at Bessey and Pine Ridge as well as on the Fort Pierre, Buffalo Gap and Ogalala grasslands. The resulting document is only the first step, said Lisa Heiser, the recreation/heritage program manager for Pine Ridge.

"It's not a decision document of any kind," she explained.

Most of the recreation facilities were constructed in the 1960s, said Tom Matza, acting district ranger.

"The Forest Service has never taken a look at them. It makes sense to see if they are still valuable and are meeting the public's needs."

The analysis is an attempt to balance different uses of the forest and still provide enjoyable experiences for the visiting public, said Charlie Marsh, acting staff services officer. There is a cost involved in maintaining campgrounds over the years, and the Forest Service must decide where it is worth those costs and where it might not be.

"Part of this has to do with budget, but overall it has to do with what you want to see," Heiser said. She then proceeded to lead the group of 30 individuals present for the first two hours of the session through each proposal for the Pine Ridge District to determine what they would like to see.

*At Cliffs, which was proposed to become a day use only area, the public said they still wanted the opportunity for dispersed camping.

*At Hudson-Meng, there was no objection to the Forest Service continuing to work with the Mammoth Site or other partners in the future to keep the facility open.

*At Outrider Trailhead, no changes were planned. Volunteers currently help with upkeep at that site, and the Forest Service is planning to continue that course of action.

*At Red Cloud, the Forest Service is proposing to turn the facility over to the state to operate as a rest stop or decommission it. Heiser said it doesn't appear that many people use it for camping anymore. Rather it operates mainly as a rest stop for drivers, and state park offers camping opportunities just one-half mile away. No one in the first two hours had any objection to that proposal.

*At Robert's Tract, those gathered for the meeting objected to the proposal to close the drinking water system. They said it was one of the best spots for trail riding and needs to be left as is.

*At Soldier's Creek, the consensus was much the same. Horse camps have been held at the facility for 35 years and it, along with Robert's are the "premier sites" in the Pine Ridge District. "Leave it alone or improve it as much as you can afford," said one individual.

*At Toadstool, the Forest has suggested making the change to a camping area, which means the site would be less developed. For example, Heiser said, as the concrete sidewalks need replaced, it would be done with gravel instead. There were no comments on this proposal during the first two hours of the session.

*At West Ash, Heiser said she's not sure why the site is even considered as a developed site. The proposal is to decommission it. However, those present once again reiterated that they want to see no changes to the site.

Though a request was made to extend the public comment period, that has not yet been done, and the public has until June 9 to comment on the proposals.