



Coalition condemns Forest Service recreation proposals

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Coalition condemns Forest Service recreation proposals
Recommendations benefit ATV riders at the expense of other forms of recreation

A coalition of recreation and environmental groups is condemning the Forest Service's recommendations in a recent assessment of its recreation infrastructure in the Allegheny National Forest. The Forest Service recommendations include closing campgrounds at Beaver Meadows in Forest County and Tracy Ridge in McKean County. The recommendations also include reducing services at numerous other campgrounds and recreation facilities throughout Pennsylvania's only national forest.

"The Forest Service just spent the last five years revising the forest plan for the Allegheny National Forest and never disclosed that it planned to close campgrounds," said Karen Atwood, member of the Tionesta Valley Snowmobile Club. "Despite the fact that recreation was one of the three so-called 'significant issues' the Forest Service focused on, it failed to inform the public that barely a year after the new plan was completed, it would start closing recreation sites. It is outrageous."

The coalition, a united front comprised of the Tionesta Valley Snowmobile Club, Allegheny Defense Project, and Friends of Rimrock and Allegheny Outdoor Adventures, claims that by proposing these recommendations after the revision of the forest plan, the Forest Service is circumventing environmental laws because, as the agency itself states, only "some of the proposed actions will require full National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis" subject to public comment and appeal.

"It is not a coincidence that the Forest Service waited until after the forest plan was completed to disclose these proposals," said Reg Darling, spokesperson for Friends of Rimrock, a group dedicated to protecting the Rimrock Overlook and Picnic Area from oil and gas drilling. "The Forest Service recreation proposals are aimed at crippling tourism at a time when the oil and gas industry would like to have free reign on extraction without public input and without tourists viewing the environmental devastation which so often accompanies drilling."

The coalition also claims the Forest Service is not fulfilling its legal obligations to manage the Allegheny for a broad array of recreation activities. For instance, in 2007, the Forest Service suggested that citizens might want to go to "other State or National Forests" for remote recreation opportunities. Additionally, the groups contend that a recent tourism study completed for Warren County indicated that the Forest Service as well as local elected officials "expressed concern that trying to grow Warren County's tourism industry might conflict with the timber, oil and gas industries."

"What we are seeing is the systematic dismantling of recreation opportunities in the Allegheny," said Ryan Talbott, ADP's forest watch coordinator. "By closing campgrounds and other recreation facilities across our national forest,

the Forest Service paves the way for oil companies to drill in these areas. If you remove the public from these areas, they are less likely to see them turned into oil fields.”

The coalition points to the proposed closing of the Tracy Ridge and Beaver Meadow campgrounds as evidence that the Forest Service is attempting to remove controversies ahead of time so that oil and gas drillers can proceed with their extraction agendas unencumbered by tourist sensitivities to the devastation which so often results from such drilling.

“Tracy Ridge is a campground in a National Recreation Area,” said Cathy Pedler, an ADP board member. “We know, however, that test wells have already been drilled adjacent to Tracy Ridge and that oil and gas companies are pressuring the Forest Service to authorize access to Tracy Ridge, which is also the largest roadless area in the Allegheny. Closing this campground serves a dual purpose – reducing recreation and turning our public land over to the oil and gas industry.”

The coalition also claims that the Forest Service’s recommendations are biased against low-impact recreation to the benefit of the ATV industry.

“The Forest Service wants to close the Beaver Meadows campground and transfer the toilet buildings to the Marienville and Timberline ATV Trails,” said Bill Belitskus, ADP’s board president. “This biased management is the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For years, instead of actively promoting all forms of recreation, the Forest Service has actively discouraged citizens from coming to the Allegheny with the exception of ATV users. Now, the Forest Service wants to reduce or completely eliminate a multitude of recreation opportunities and blame it on the public instead of addressing the root of the problem, which is the Forest Service’s skewed priorities.”

“The Forest Service wants to blame the public for low visitation rates, but what it really needs to do is take a long look in the mirror,” said John Stoneman of the Allegheny Outdoor Group. “The reason the Forest Service is registering lower visitation rates is partly because it does not perform the most basic maintenance of existing infrastructure. There have already been several times this summer that the restroom facilities at the Rimrock Overlook and Picnic Area were without the basic necessity of toilet paper. The Crown Jewel of the Allegheny and one of the most advertised and visited attractions in our area, were not maintained to accommodate the visiting public. We hope the Forest Service is not trying to dissuade the public from visiting Rimrock so oil and gas companies can destroy this gem in the heart of the Allegheny.”

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