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Feds consider new fee and closing three campgrounds

Forest Service analysis includes potentially charging fee at pass closure gate

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ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

ASPEN – The U.S. Forest Service is considering closing three small campgrounds in the Aspen-Sopris District and possibly charging hikers, skiers and snowmobilers a \$1 fee at the winter closure gate on Independence Pass.

None of the closures or the fee are imminent, according to an official with the White River National Forest supervisor's office. They are contemplated in a planning document called a recreation facility analysis. But that plan outlines management options, not definitive direction, said Rich Doak, recreation manager for the White River National Forest supervisor's office.

That document was completed in August 2007 but was only unveiled on the forest's website this month. National forests supervisors across the country are under a mandate from the Forest Service's Washington, D.C., headquarters to finish an exam of their developed recreation facilities by the end of 2008 and determine which should be closed, improved or left alone.

The White River National Forest's plan raises the prospect of closing the Silver Bar Campground in the Maroon Creek Valley; Elk Wallow Campground in the Fryingpan Valley; and Portal Campground up Lincoln Creek. In addition, a fee at the winter closure gate on Highway 82 east of Aspen could be charged if a toilet needs to be installed there, the document says.

Portal campground hangs by thread

The Aspen Times examined the plan Friday. Other outstanding issues were the possibility of charging a fee during summers at the Grottos picnic trailhead and reducing access to the structures at the Independence ghost town.

Doak warned against reading too much into the possibility of closing campgrounds. "To say they're in threat of closure is overstating [it]," he said.

However, Portal Campground, a small but popular spot next to Grizzly Reservoir on Independence Pass, is hanging on by a thread. The Forest Service made the decision to "decommission" it in 2006, but met stiff resistance once the intent was publicized. The seven-site campground remains open only because the caretakers of the water diversion system at Grizzly Reservoir are cleaning the toilet and supplying toilet paper. If that agreement ends, Portal will be decommissioned, and the facilities will be removed, Doak said.

Elk Wallow Campground is currently managed by a concessionaire, 1,000 Trails. However, the area is small, with only seven sites, and secluded, so it isn't profitable for the company. Doak said no closure is currently planned, but the Forest Service is unlikely to spend funds to upgrade facilities or replace them as they age.

The recreation facility analysis said the season should be shortened at Elk Wallow and that it should be “decommissioned as time allows.” There was no timeline for the action.

Silver Bar Campground’s fate is at a crossroads, according to the analysis. The management options range from making no changes, to improving the toilets and increasing the fee, to decommissioning the entire site. The campground has only five sites, but it is in the popular Maroon Creek Valley.

Less attention for ghost town

At the Independence ghost town, where the white man’s settlement of the Roaring Fork Valley began, the Forest Service has decided to close access to some of the old cabins and other buildings so that it doesn’t have to perform the maintenance to keep them safe. That will save the agency \$15,000, the analysis says.

A fee at the winter closure gate east of Aspen is dependent on sanitation needs, according to Doak. The area is popular for hikers, cross-country skiers and snowmobilers in the winter because the highway is closed. People park at the closure gate and travel up the road right of way. Increasing popularity could create the need for bathrooms at the trailhead, Doak said. The funds to pay for a facility could be raised through a fee, such as \$1 per head.

No decision has been made on the winter fee, Doak stressed. “I don’t know if that’s moving forward,” he said. If so, it will likely have to go through the National Environmental Policy Act review process.

The plan calls for a decision to be made on the fee by 2011. The estimated cost to install and monitor a fee-collection system and install a bathroom is \$100,000. It would be collected only in the winter.

Partially driven by dollars

The recreation facility analysis was necessary, in part, to cut costs, according to the Forest Service. The agency aims to reduce its deferred maintenance expenses by 20 percent over the next five years. In another five years, the process will start again.

Doak said the document is a tool the agency uses to set priorities. Although it’s gotten a lot of attention nationally in recent years, the White River National Forest has long used that process to set priorities.

“We have been improving some sites, closing others and repositioning our resources for years in response to needs,” he said.

In some cases changes in demands, rather than dollars and cents, dictated changes in services.

“Many of our facilities were built 30 to 50 years ago and have reached the end of their useful life without significant deferred maintenance investment,” the summary of the White River’s analysis says. “Other facilities receive little or no use, and no longer serve the demand that existed 30 to 50 years ago.

“The fundamental premise of the program of work is to create an inventory which is sufficiently sustainable and flexible to be annually adapted to any changes in the available

resources,” the summary says.

Doak said the recreation facility analysis helps the White River district channel dollars to the most sensible projects. Six new toilets are being installed, for example, at Chapman Campground in the Fryingpan Valley, one of the district’s largest.

Critics contend the Forest Service approach will result in the agency retaining only those facilities that make money.

“That’s the big and ugly picture across the country,” said Kitty Bazar, president of a citizens group called the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. The Durango-based group opposes fees to use public lands, but it is also concerned about Forest Service fiscal management.

Bazar said facilities have already been paid for through tax dollars, so citizens shouldn’t have to pay to use them. In addition, the Forest Service’s strict, businesslike approach to closing facilities that aren’t profitable isn’t the way public lands should be managed, she said.

The organization is lobbying members of Congress for greater oversight of Forest Service spending. Bazar said she wants a moratorium on action proposed in the recreation facility analysis until that oversight is discussed.

The analysis can be found at www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver/. Click on the “Jump to recreation” link and then choose the “Recreation Facilities Analysis” link in a box titled Quick Picks.