

## Initial phase of public comments for Allegheny National Forest Recreational Facilities Analysis is over

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The initial phase of public comments for the Allegheny National Forest Recreational Facilities Analysis is over.

Monday marked the final day forest officials would accept public comments regarding the national forest's ongoing RFA, an analysis to streamline recreation areas within the forest to meet visitor demand.

But Kathy Mohney, national forest spokeswoman, said Tuesday that forest officials will continue to seek public input while a program of work is created.

A program of work is a plan developed by forest officials that outlines their intent over the next five years.

The U.S. Forest Service is trying to trim costs by eliminating some recreation areas that are not financially viable anymore. There are currently sites on the forest operating below standard due to a large amount of maintenance costs — the Forest Service could eliminate more than \$2.8 million in maintenance costs with its proposed program of work, which would eliminate recreation sites like Tracy Ridge, Dewdrop and Beaver Meadows Campground.

The public comments gathered over the past few months were general comments. Any site specific changes the Forest Service proposes require a process that falls under the National Environmental Policy Act. This act forces a federal agency to solicit public opinion, among other requirements, for any processes that affect the environment.

The substance of the comments was not available, Mohney said, but, she added, recreation officials are currently sorting the comments.

Mohney said that once the public comments are sorted and assessed they will be put into specific folders called a public "scoping" file.

"The public is a huge part in all the processes we do," she said. "Once the NEPA process begins, we will ask for public comment about specific sites and recreation areas. The comments that we have already, that are pointed at a specific recreation area, will be used in our analysis of specific sites as well."

However, a coalition of environmental groups has chastised the Forest Service for what they call the "Forest Service's lack of leadership and commitment" to properly manage recreational facilities within the forest.

"The Forest Service held only one public meeting to decide the future of recreation sites and facilities on the Allegheny," said Reg Darling, spokesman for Friends of Rimrock, in an e-mail Tuesday night. "This process has been flawed from the start."

The coalition claims that even though the Forest Service solicited public opinion, there is still a "glaring lack of public opinion." The coalition, formed of the Allegheny Defense Project, Allegheny Outdoor Adventures, Friends of Rimrock and Tionesta Valley Snowmobile Club, said the proposed closings and decommissioning of recreation areas is unwarranted.

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"It is simply an analysis," she said. "The public will be able to comment on any decision we make under NEPA. We will inform the public in a number of ways as we progress."