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Public land managers must remember public

An Aspen Times Editorial
BY ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

Some public land managers who play a vital role in making the Roaring Fork Valley such a special place need a reminder that we are living in the information age.

The U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Colorado Division of Wildlife undertook projects recently that are of huge public interest in a vacuum of information.

The Forest Service's White River Forest Supervisor's office started a process at least five years ago to examine what trailheads, campgrounds and other recreation amenities should be maintained and what should be closed. Information on the recreation facility analysis was sparse because, agency officials insisted, it was an internal review and a work in progress.

Forests throughout the Western states were mandated by the Forest Service chief to undertake similar processes, and word eventually leaked about possible closures of amenities. Citizens were upset. A special committee formed by the Forest Service in late 2006 concluded the agency needed to collect more public input. That directive was released by the chief in January 2007.

The White River National Forest finished its analysis in August 2007. No public meetings were ever held; no notice was issued about the completion of the plan. The document showed up on the White River National Forest website this month after a citizens' group pressed the supervisor's office for a copy.

Forest Service officials downplayed the analysis' significance, which calls for the possible closure of three small campgrounds, among other things. We're quite certain the public would have liked to give the Forest Service its opinion, and it would have been helpful for agency officials to explain their reasoning.

The Forest Service isn't alone in its need to communicate more clearly with its constituency. The BLM and state wildlife division teamed in June on a project to improve wildlife habitat on Light Hill in Old Snowmass. The project seems worthy enough, but it caught most people off guard.

Officials with the agencies sheepishly noted that they notified representatives of homeowners' associations about the project in advance and didn't hear anything back. That is a disappointing effort. It is the minimum required by law for the federal government's environmental review.

Next time there is a project of that scope, which involved clearing brush on 376 acres of highly visible hillside, we would like to see the agencies contact conservation groups, make brief announcements at the appropriate county commissioner and town council meetings, post notices on websites and even give the various media outlets a heads up.

Public scrutiny should be regarded as a helpful step, not an inconvenience.

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