



## Fewer dollars mean cuts loom at national forests

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It should come as no surprise in this era of steeply rising costs for basic goods that even federally owned national forests are affected, which, in turn, mean raising prices for forest users and closing down facilities.



That's what's on tap in 2009 for the nearly 1 million acre Huron-Manistee National Forest in the Lower Peninsula.

The cost of doing business has risen steadily and so has the maintenance backlog that now totals \$1.5 million for its 174 developed recreation sites.

"We're looking at \$100,000 in additional revenue coming back to the sites," said Carol Boll, recreation program manager for the forest.

Boll floated a proposal earlier this year to raise fees at 68 of the 174 recreation sites along with entry fees. Fees will be increased on 11 other sites next year.

The new revenue will bring the \$240,000-to-\$300,000 spent now on maintenance closer to the \$400,000 annual costs. Boll said the forest also is raising the fees to be more on par with other private and public recreational facilities that charge more.

The new money will be used to make improvements on signs, toilets, campgrounds, trailheads, launches, scenic overlooks and the like.

"If we have to replace one toilet, that is \$15,000," Boll said. "Next year we will be replacing a bunch of toilets at the Lake Michigan Recreation Area and will be working on picnic and boating sites along the Pere Marquette River."

### Fee increase proposed

The proposals calls for fees to rise from \$3 to \$5 at 52 day-use sites like Big M, near Wellston, the popular cross country ski and mountain bike trail complex; at Hoist Lake hiking trailhead, and the Hungerford horse trailhead, among others.

Campground fees will go up either \$3 a night at campgrounds like Driftwood Valley, or the Hungerford horse camp, where fees will rise from \$12 to \$15 a night. Other sites, like Minnie Pond or Bowman Lake, will increase by \$7 from \$3 to \$10 per night.

Nightly group camping fees will also rise from \$15 to as much as \$30 depending on the size of the group. Dispersed camping along the AuSable River will increase from \$5 to \$10 a night. The forest has

102 dispersed sites along 55 miles of river.

Even the Kirtland's Warbler Guided Tour will increase from \$5 to \$10 for adults, while youth 17 and under are free.

Then comes the forest's recreation pass which will increase from \$3 to \$5 for a daily pass, from \$5 to \$15 for a weekly pass, and from \$20 to \$30 for an annual pass.

None of these are outrageous costs, but some are no longer cheap, especially combined with the rising cost of travel.

On the other hand, someone has to pay for the developed sites. They require ongoing maintenance. General taxpayer dollars once funded them to a larger extent, but those days are gone.

Fees will be dropped at three locations: the Hungerford cross-country Ski Trailhead, the Bowman Lake Trailhead on the North Country Trail, and Hungerford Lake campground.

This isn't good news. The fees will be eliminated because the sites have not been maintained properly. They have deteriorated to the point that the forest can no longer justify charging fees.

It also has no plans to refurbish the sites. This is the tip of the iceberg, the leading edge of other changes in the works. National forests all across the country have been asked this past year to review and evaluate all of their recreational facilities -- to see which are used or not, what still makes sense, what is affordable.

HMNF staffers plan to decommission or find private partners for nearly a dozen sites. Those include observation decks, trailheads, boat launches and campgrounds. The closures are a form of fiscal triage, a means to reduce maintenance costs and free limited dollars for higher priority projects.

"We looked at all the recreation sites and where the forest needs to go financially," Boll said. "We asked what is unique about this forest that you cannot get elsewhere?"

The answer was federally designated recreation sites. They would be top priority. Those include the Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness, the North Country Scenic Trail, historic sites like Lumberman's Monument, and Loda Lake Wildflower Preserve, the only federally designated wildflower preserve.

"National designations were at the top of the list," Boll said. "The second tier was the uniqueness of its rivers and semi-primitive non-motorized areas. The third tier was the 1,600 miles of motorized and non-motorized trails."

The last category includes places like the Hungerford Lake trail complex, a Big Rapids area destination for horseback riders, mountain bikers and cross-country skiers. Equestrians have worked hard for years developing a great trail and campground there. Both groups worked hard this summer to reduce problems between cyclists and equestrians.

The trails are to stay open as is the campground, but the ski trailhead there will be closed.

It's not all that high on the list," said Boll "And those higher up need more work. Nothing is cut in stone.

"We are looking at a five-year plan, meaning what do we have now and what can we maintain over the

next five years. It's been a painful process...."

Stay tuned.

There is more to come.

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