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Proposal aims to build support for Roberts trailhead restoration

By GEORGE LEDBETTER, Record Editor

Restoring and maintaining a popular U.S. Forest Service campground, trailhead and three-mile hiking trail southwest of Chadron has become a shared goal of several area organizations, according to Jim Lees, member of the Northwest Nebraska High Country, a group of rural landowners who offer lodging, hunting and recreation on their Pine Ridge area properties.

Much of the area near the Roberts campground was burned during the fires that swept across the Pine Ridge in August, 2006, and the campground's loop trail, used by hikers and horseback riders to access the longer Pine Ridge trail and other parts of the Nebraska National Forest, has become difficult and sometimes dangerous to follow, said Lees.

That's troubling to NNHC, whose members promote rural tourism, because the Roberts campground is one of the best access points to the scenic National Forest land that draws many visitors to the area, he said.

NNHC is also concerned about a Forest Service proposal that would change the designation of the trailhead to a "camping area," rather than a campground, and close the water system. A decision on those ideas, part of a larger Recreation Facilities plan for the entire Nebraska National Forest, hasn't yet been made.

The concerns led NNHC and other groups, including the Crawford Natural Horsemanship Club, Ride the Ridge, High Country Ranch Ride, and the Upper Niobrara White Natural Resource District to join in support of restoration of the Roberts campground, trailhead and trail by the Forest Service, said Lees.

The historic Roberts ranch, at the head of Trunk Butte and Indian Creek drainages, was recognized for its potential recreation, range land and wildlife habitat uses when it was acquired by the Forest Service in the 1970s, according to Lees. With the development of the visitor amenities, including fire grates, toilets, the campground and water system, and a well graveled access road in the 1980s the site became a favorite of visitors, he said.

But resurgent grasses following the fire, coupled with remaining downed timber and some erosion, has made the loop trail hard to find, according to Lees, who said recent visitors have remarked on the problem.

Having water at the trailhead is also important for visitors, said Lees. "Water is critical," he said.

NNHC recently invited Nebraska National Forest Supervisor Jane Darnell to its monthly meeting, and discussed the Roberts campground with her, said Lees. Darnell indicated that support for restoration of the facility was welcome, he said.

Last week Lees presented the group's formal proposal to Darnell, in order to continue the process. The proposal says that the cooperating groups will maintain communication with the Forest Service, provide input for the agency's recreation facilities plan, and possibly provide some help for completing projects.

The groups plan to host a cook-out and trail ride at the Roberts campground next fall to recognize the accomplishments of their cooperative efforts, said Lees.