

HIRA Fees Debated

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Special to the Sun

The Forest Service held a public meeting last Monday, Feb. 2, at the Oddfellows Hall in Kernville to report on the agency's recreation revenue and expenditures for FY 2008. Over 30 community members attended the meeting to learn where the Forest Service is spending their recreation dollars and to provide feedback to the Forest Service on the reporting process.

The meeting was in response to the public request at a May, 2008 HIRA meeting for the Forest Service to be accountable for the extra dollars they were receiving in High Impact Recreation Area fees around popular sites surrounding Isabella Lake. Sequoia National Forest (SNF) Supervisor Tina Terrell opened the meeting by explaining the process the Forest Service underwent to ensure that the public received the information they requested. "Last year, just before the Piute Fire, the public asked the Forest Service to be accountable for how our recreation fees are spent, and I thought that was a reasonable request," said Terrell, "I am big on transparency and finding out what you, the public, want to do with your public land, because it is your land."

Kern River District Ranger Rick Larson then gave a PowerPoint presentation which included facts and figures about where and how recreation fees have been collected and how they have been spent, first at a Sequoia National Forest-wide level, and further broken down into income and expenditures for each district. In 2008, SNF received \$1.5M in recreation fees, but the agency projects a 8% decrease in 2009. Recreation fees come from appropriated funds from Congress as well as from campground and day use fees, Special Use Permit fees, and America the Beautiful and other passes. Fees collected at certain sites, such as campgrounds and day use areas, are covered under the Recreation

Enhancement Act (REA) which states that 80% of the fees collected at each site are used to enhance that site, while 15% goes to the Supervisor's Office and 5% is then sent to the Regional Office. Of all of the HIRA areas in the Kern Valley, Camp 9 received the most REA fees in 2008, totaling approximately \$36,000, and so the largest amount of work



Brandon Muncy/Kern Valley Sun

Peter Wiechers of Kernville debates the impact of HIRA campground fee increases with US Forest Service Supervisor Tina Terrell at a public meeting held Feb. 2 in Kernville.

will be done there in 2009, replacing rock fire rings with metal ones, planting trees, and redesigning the campground layout. "We would like to provide more amenities to provide you, the visitor, with a more pleasurable experience," said Larson. With the 8% recreation fund decrease forest-wide the three Districts of the SNF will be hit hard with budget cuts; Kern

River Ranger District recreation budget will decrease by 17%, Hume Lake District faces a 19% budget cut, and Western Divide District is hardest hit with a 21% decrease in recreation dollars. However, the Supervisors Office will receive a 63% increase, using recreation dollars to hire a staff Archaeologist.

Of the \$451,000 spent on recreation in the SNF in FY 2008, \$225,226 went to repair, maintenance, and facility enhancement; \$110,556 to visitor services; \$87,820 to cost of collection of fees; and \$26,594 was given to law enforcement. The largest amount of money goes, of course, to pay salaries of the people who carry out the various duties needed to keep the forest running. All Forest Service personnel received at least a cost of living pay increase in 2009 despite the reduced budget, which angered one meeting attendee, who pointed out that many people across the nation are living without pay raises in this tough economy.

Several members of the audience brought up specific instances in the report where the numbers did not add up, and one noticed that the numbers that the Forest Service was presenting to the public was different by \$400,000 than the numbers they had reported to Congress. Local anti-HIRA fee champion Peter Weichers brought up a discrepancy in the amount of dollars the rafting companies paid in Special Use Permit fees vs. the amount reported for those fees. Terrell and Larson stated that the difference was due to the calendar year vs. the SNF fiscal year, which goes from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30. Another audience member was not satisfied with the answer, and mentioned that, "Even if the calendar year and fiscal year were not the same, a year is twelve months and approximately the same amount of money should be reported each year; \$40,000 is a big discrepancy in my opinion," he said.

Meeting facilitator Gina Bartlett from the Center for Collaborative Policy, who had been hired to ensure that the meeting flowed according to the Forest Service schedule and agenda, then asked that the group shift their questions and comments to helping the agency perfect the budget reporting process in the future. SNF recently purchased new software from their recreation budget to more accurately report where their dollars are going. They plan to hold annual meetings like this one, as well as updating their budget quarterly on the SNF website. One audience member suggested that in order to truly be transparent, SNF needs to do a complete budget which accounts for every dollar received and spent and then further break it down into categories. Another mentioned that many people are not computer savvy, and suggested that the Forest Service post their budgets in the Post Offices. Someone suggested that to cut costs, one of the Kern Valley offices be closed and consolidated into one building, since the cost of operating two ranger stations ten miles from each other seemed an unnecessary expense. This suggestion was met with a glare by Terrell, but no response.

In all, most meeting attendees left with a feeling of unease and discontent about the reporting. “When the Federal Government audits us, they expect us to account for every penny we spend,” said Brian Cosgrove, who worked as a River Ranger for SNF for nine years, “When you bring us information with numbers that don’t add up, that’s not transparency.”