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Busy Ochoco campground may change, closing it for 2010 season

By Kate Ramsayer / The Bulletin

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Walton Lake Campground could soon have larger — but fewer — campsites, new picnic tables and handicapped-accessible facilities, under a proposal from the U.S. Forest Service.

But the construction effort would close the site — the busiest campground in the Ochoco National Forest — for the 2010 season while crews make the changes.

“We take seriously the imposition that will place on folks,” said Bill Queen, Lookout Mountain District ranger with the Forest Service. “But we realize that, to make the improvements that are obviously there to help improve their recreation experience in the longer term, that’s just a part of what we’ll be faced with in the short term.”

The project stemmed from an analysis the Ochoco National Forest conducted several years ago, along with national forests across the country, to determine which recreation sites the forest will keep up during different seasons, which campsites or trail heads need improvements and which facilities should be decommissioned.

“In these strained budget times, we haven’t been able to maintain all of our sites to standard,” Queen said.

But Walton Lake Campground made the list of sites to be improved, and the Forest Service is taking public comments on the \$612,000 proposal.

“It is our most developed site on the Ochoco (National Forest), and the most popular site for visitors,” said Cathy Lund, timber and recreation staff officer with the national forest. “We’re going to be doing improvements on about half of the campground sites and the two group-use areas.”

Many of the sites will be relocated and angled for easy access, and one of the loops connecting sites will be made into a one-way road, Lund said. And to accommodate larger recreation vehicles, the sites themselves will be leveled and lengthened to 50 feet. The agency is planning to getting rid of three sites, Lund said. One is currently in a site that’s too narrow to expand and improve, she said, while the other two are isolated, far from the bathrooms and on often-soggy ground.

“It would be better to not just have them there, and (the site) brought back to native landscape,” she said.

Forest Service staff considered adding new sites, she said, but felt that doing so would make the spot less appealing.

“It would just be sites all around the lake,” she said.

But the list of improvements includes reorienting parking spots and redesigning a campsite to make it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“There’s a full spectrum of improvements that are planned,” Queen said, “with a real focus on trying to make the individual campsite facilities more accessible to folks.”

Tim Morgan, owner of Prineville Power Sports, said he used to camp at Walton Lake, but it’s too crowded in recent years.

“It’s a popular spot with everyone in the community. It’s a really nice fishing lake.”
But it needs more — and bigger — campsites, he said.

“When we had our short trailer or the camper, it was fine,” Morgan said. “Now, we’ve got bigger stuff.”

The Forest Service also plans to expand the other sites at Walton Lake if the agency receives additional funding, Lund said. The agency staff is also looking for funding to improve the milelong walking trail around the lake, creating an ADA-accessible section. If the initial phase of the Walton Lake project is approved, the campground would be closed after Labor Day — a couple weeks earlier than usual, said Virginia Gibbons, spokeswoman with the Forest Service. And it would remain closed for the entire 2010 season, she said.

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