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Survey finds sharp drop in visitors to area forests

But U.S. Forest Service officials question relevance of results, citing differences in counting methods

By Kate Ramsayer / The Bulletin

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A recent survey shows dramatic decreases in the number of visitors to the region's two national forests in 2008 compared with a count in 2002. But U.S. Forest Service officials say differences in counting methods mean the comparison is not reliable, even though they paid \$150,000 for one survey in the Deschutes National Forest.

The calculated number of visitors to the Deschutes National Forest dropped 40 percent between 2002 and 2008, from 3.1 million visits to 1.9 million visits. At the Ochoco National Forest, the decrease was about 57 percent, from 569,000 visits in 2002 to 247,000 visits in 2008.

Forest Service recreation staff say that those numbers are not representative of what has happened on the ground.

"If the use of the national forest is significantly declining, I would definitely be concerned," said Mark Christiansen, recreation program manager with the Deschutes and Ochoco national forests. But he said based on other things like campground concessions, highway counts and recreation fees, he thinks the drop is more in the 2 to 3 percent range. "What (we see) out on the ground is different from what I see in the report," he said.

The visitor surveys, conducted at each national forest every five years or so as part of the agency's National Visitor Use Monitoring Program, began about a decade ago as a response to concerns that the Forest Service didn't have reliable visitor counts, said Bob Deane, recreation, engineering, lands and minerals staff officer with the Deschutes National Forest.

"Prior to that, it was anecdotal information," Deane said. "It was just taking pieces of information from various sources and trying to come up with an estimate of how much use there was going on. And people recognized that it was not very well-documented." Survey under scrutiny

The National Visitor Use Monitoring Program was supposed to help solve the Forest Service's visitor counting problem, said Scott Silver, the executive director of Bend-based Wild Wilderness, but it's hard to judge what's happening in the national forests when agency staff are saying the decreases reported through the program aren't valid. "They created this program at enormous cost to the public," he said. "And it was supposed to be the fix to biased data (and) inaccurate data, and now we're about seven years into the program, and they're denying that this works."

The Deschutes forest survey alone cost about \$150,000, said Chuck Frayer, National Visitor Use Monitoring Program manager with the regional Forest Service office in Portland. He said that it will take at least two more monitoring periods — or 10 years — to get a true sense of any trends about national forest use.

Framer added that he thinks the 2008 surveying methods are “100 times” better than the 2002 methods, and that the Forest Service will stick with them for the next counting cycle. While the 2008 report, by itself, can’t reveal trends, Framer said it still provides information about how people are using the national forests and how satisfied they are with what they find there.

To do the survey locally and across the country, the Forest Service agency contracted with West Virginia University to survey people out hiking, driving, camping and visiting national forests — asking them questions as they left particular sites and calculating visitation use from the surveys and statistical models.

But the surveying methods changed a lot between the 2002 survey and the 2008 report, with different systems set up to determine when and where surveyors should question visitors, Framer said, which accounted for some of the drop in visitor numbers.

In the first go-around, including the 2002 survey, people were visiting sites in the middle of the week or at other times that might not have resulted in the best information, Framer said. The second round, including the 2008 survey, was planned with the help of a computer database that helped establish a better counting method.

“We can’t really be looking at trying to correlate the number from Round 1 to Round 2 because the process was different. Everything was very, very different,” he said.

Economic impact

Beyond the different methodology, however, Framer listed other things could have contributed to the visitor drop.

Less snow during fiscal year 2008 could have impacted winter use numbers, he said. And that summer, gas prices soared, which could have cut down on travel for people who view the Deschutes as a destination, or hunters who typically head to the Ochocos.

“Those were huge factors that ended up affecting us in this snapshot of use,” he said.

Visitor use numbers for the Deschutes and Ochoco national forests dropped more than the Oregon forests surveyed in 2007 — numbers for the Willamette National Forest fell about 20 percent, for example, and the Umpqua National Forest fell 26 percent. But Framer said that it wasn’t a concern to the regional office staff, since almost all of the numbers decreased.

“Looking at all 18 forests we have, only one of their numbers stayed about the same,” he said.

The reported drop in visitor numbers could influence how much money the two Central Oregon national forests get, since the survey is one of a handful of factors that go into determining recreation budgets, Framer said. He added that any change would probably be small because of the other components.

The national forests are a key factor in drawing people and their business to the Central Oregon area, said Doug LaPlaca, president and CEO of Visit Bend.

“The role that the national forest has surrounding Bend is enormous. It can’t be overstated,” LaPlaca said. “The Bend economy is primarily a recreation-based economy, and the majority of the recreation that happens around Bend, from a tourism standpoint, happens on the national forest.”

He is skeptical of the survey’s calculated drop in numbers from 3.1 million to 1.9 million in 2008, and said that other indicators, like room tax, have not dropped. In fact, more room tax was collected in 2008 than in 2002.

Kreg Lindberg, an associate professor in the tourism and outdoor leadership program at Oregon State University, said he was surprised by the decrease as well, especially considering the increase in Central Oregon's population.

"I expected a decrease because I had heard about the methodological issues, but the magnitude of the decrease was more than I expected," Lindberg said.

What's causing the decline?

Beyond the survey's change in methods, other possible reasons for the drop in visitors include trends away from traditional outdoor activities like hiking, fishing and backpacking. Or those moving to the area might have different interests, like golf, he said.

Counting visitors is a challenge for the Forest Service, because unlike the National Park Service, the agency doesn't have defined entrance gates where staff can count almost all visitors to the forest, Lindberg said. And, he added, it's hard to look for trends with a five- or six-year gap between data points.

As a snapshot of 2008, the report detailed many other factors about the demographics of who visited the national forests in Central Oregon, what they did, how much they spent on the trip and how happy they were with their experience.

About 82 percent of those surveyed said they were satisfied with the facilities, such as restrooms, at developed sites, while 88 percent were satisfied with the access to these sites.

In wilderness areas, 99 percent were satisfied with the facilities, but only 56 percent were satisfied with services, such as availability of information and signs in the area.

"Part of (the goal of the report) is to get a better understanding of the people who use the national forest, what kind of activities they're engaging in, what they think about their experiences," said Deane, with the Deschutes National Forest. "Things that went well (or) that didn't go as well."

Kate Ramsayer can be reached at 541-617-7811 or at kramsayer@bendbulletin.com.