

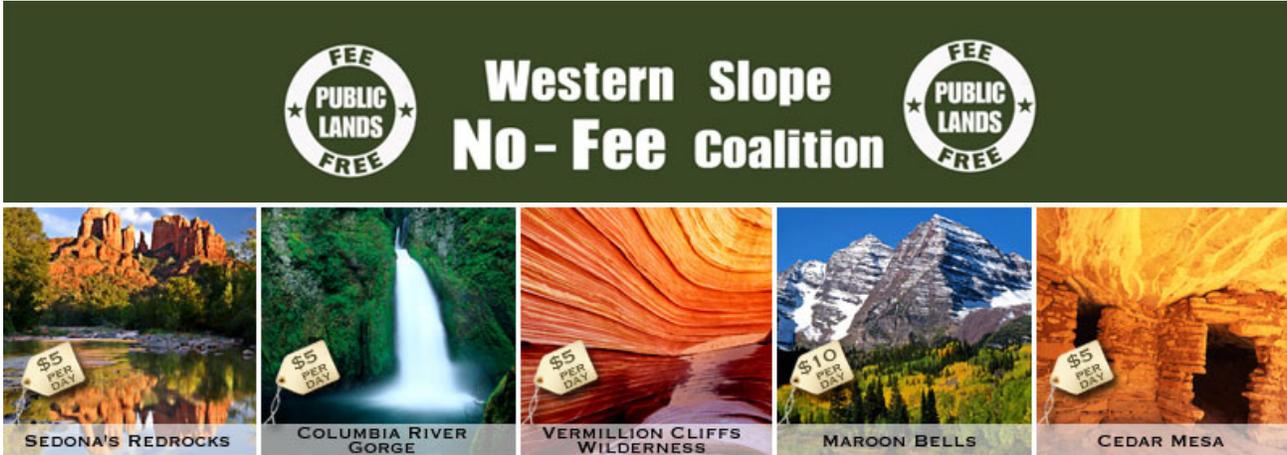


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## Forest Service To Eliminate Senior and Disabled Camping Discounts

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### Forest Service To Eliminate Senior and Disabled Camping Discounts

DURANGO, CO - The U.S. Forest Service has announced it plans to eliminate the 50% discount at National Forest campgrounds that has traditionally been available to holders of lifetime Senior and Access (permanent disability) passes. The change will apply at campgrounds operated by private concessioners, which represent 50% of National Forest camping capacity and 82% of reservable campsites.

In a notice in the [December 1st Federal Register](#), the agency outlined a new policy that would replace the half-price rule that has been in place since the mid-'60s with a 10% discount. The policy would also require Senior and Access passholders to pay a fee at National Forest day-use sites that are currently covered in full by their passes.

Seniors 62 and older pay a one-time \$10 fee for their lifetime pass. Lifetime passes for the permanently disabled are free. Together, Senior and Access passes represent more than 78% of all pass sales.

Under current policy, concessioners are required to honor Senior and Access passes for campground fees under the same terms as if the Forest Service operated the facility directly, meaning that a 50% discount must be offered. Most highly-developed campgrounds are now concessioner-run.

As the concessioner program has expanded over the past thirty years, it has moved away from a small mom-and-pop business model to one dominated by a few large corporations. According to the published notice, those firms brought five specific complaints to the Forest Service: 1) the REA does not require the 50% discount, only Forest Service policy does; 2) the discount is too steep; 3) the 50% discount is non-negotiable and can't be used as a "marketing tool to encourage off-peak use"; 4) as the baby-boomer generation ages, too many people are becoming eligible for the discount; and 5) prices to other campers must be increased to cover the discounts given to lifetime passholders.

The bottom line is, it's hurting their bottom lines.

The move is possible only because of changes in the laws that authorize recreation fees on public lands. Until 2005 such fees were governed by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. That law established the Golden Age and Golden Access passes, entitling the holder to lifetime free entry to National Parks and giving a 50% discount on federal camping fees. In 2005 a new law called the Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) took effect, replacing the previous authority. Under REA, lifetime passes are still offered but the 50% camping discount is no longer required. The Forest Service had, until now, continued the discount as a matter of policy and had required concessioners to do so as a condition of their operating permits.

The REA specifies that pre-existing holders of Golden Age and Golden Access passes can continue to use them in accordance with the terms they were issued under "to the extent practicable." That means they should be grandfathered-in for the 50% discount as long as the pass is not lost or stolen. But when the new REA-authorized Senior and Access passes became available in 2007, Golden passholders were encouraged to exchange their old paper pass for one of the new plastic ones, and according to the Forest Service many did. Now the Forest Service is claiming that keeping track of different discounts for Golden passholders than REA passholders is "not practicable."

"The Forest Service is not showing good faith by changing the terms of the passes after the fact," said Western Slope No-Fee Coalition President Kitty Benzar. "They encouraged people to turn in their Golden passes, which guaranteed a 50% camping discount, in exchange for an REA pass which does not, without telling them that they were giving up an important benefit. If they can't find a practical way to distinguish between the two types of passes, the only fair thing to do is to continue to offer the 50% discount to both groups."

Day-use sites managed by concessioners will also be affected. Under the new policy, holders of the annual America the Beautiful Pass would be entitled to free entry, but Senior and Access lifetime passholders would get only a 10% discount. This changes current policy which calls for all three passes to be honored equally at day-use fee sites.

The change is the latest in a long series of policy decisions that have transformed recreation on public lands from a public benefit into a market commodity.

"Until 1997, when the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program was implemented, it was government policy that public lands were to be available equally to all Americans, with modest fees only for a few highly developed sites and for entrance to National Parks," said Benzar. "They were one of the benefits we enjoyed as citizens and all supported with our tax dollars. Since then there has been a systematic policy shift. Public lands are now expected to pay their own way in access fees."

She pointed out that under previous policy, offering lifetime passes and substantial discounts to seniors and the disabled was a way of honoring their contributions to our nation and ensuring them access to the benefits of outdoor recreation. "I guess that's out the window now," she said. "No more special honors, no more special breaks. Pay up or stay home now applies to everyone."

Benzar encouraged those who oppose the change to submit comments to the Forest Service and also to contact their congressional delegations. The Forest Service is accepting comments until February 1, 2010 at <http://www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.html#submitComment?R=0900006480a60f36>. Congressional contact information can be found at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).

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