



U.S. Forest Service seeks end of half-off discount for seniors

By Matthew Preusch, The Oregonian

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Looking forward to spending your golden years on the cheap parking the camper at national forest campgrounds? Might be time to redo your budget.

The **U.S. Forest Service** wants to eliminate its long-standing half-off discount for seniors and the disabled at federal campgrounds run by private companies. Concessionaires now operate most of the agency's developed campsites.

"It doubles the cost, but psychologically, it's just irritating," said George Hermach of Eugene, who with his wife, Ruth, has worn out three Volkswagen vans and an Airstream trailer camping around Oregon.

"We find that commercial campgrounds are pretty expensive now, so we've always generally camped on Forest Service campgrounds and national parks," said George, 87.

The private companies that manage the Forest Service's campsites are required to give the discount to seniors such as the Hermachs. The same is true for disabled persons with passes. A lifetime pass that entitles its holder to the discount is \$10 for those 62 and older and free for those with disabilities.

The agency this week filed a **notice** in the Federal Register proposing to reduce to 10 percent the minimum discount that private concessionaires are required to offer to those groups.

"No more special honors, no more special breaks," said Kitty Benzar, president of the **Western Slope No-Fee Coalition**, which opposes fees for public lands. "Pay up or stay home now applies to everyone."

The senior and disability passes made up about 80 percent of the roughly 76,000 special public lands passes the agency sold last year. There are likely many hundreds of thousands of pass-holders nationwide, though the agency doesn't have figures for how many passes are active.

All those forest users now encounter campgrounds that are very different from those a few decades ago, when Forest Service employees -- familiar figures in green uniforms -- were running most of the agency's campgrounds.

Today, the campground you stay at is likely run by a private corporation holding one of 150 separate contracts with the agency. More than four out of five reservable camping spots in the national forest system are privately managed, the agency estimates. The half-off discount would still apply at Forest Service-run campgrounds.

Concessionaires have been pushing for years for the elimination of the mandatory discount, arguing that recent federal laws no longer require them to offer it. They also argue the discount is too steep, unreasonable given the growing number of baby boomers, and that it forces them to charge other customers more.

"To give a 50 percent discount to one group is unheard of. I'm a senior myself, and if I go to the movies, I'll get maybe a dollar off," said Chuck Shepard, CEO of **Hoodoo Recreation Services Inc.**, of Coburg, which manages 150 Forest Service campgrounds with about 4,000 campsites in Oregon and Washington.



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Arline Cook, left, of Federal Way, WA., and Carol Carnahan of Goldendale, WA., play cards at a campground in the Mt. Hood National Forest. The Forest Service is considering reducing a discount offered to seniors and the disabled for most agency campsites.

Shepard said flexibility on discounts would allow him to offer larger incentives for less popular campgrounds or on weekdays to steer visitor traffic away from busy sites.

"We don't think that will necessarily increase our income as much as it will reallocate things," he said.

A typical Hoodoo campsite costs around \$10 to \$25 a night, and the Forest Service estimates the 50 percent discount costs concessionaires such as Hoodoo about \$4 million a year. With the swelling of baby boomers hitting the road in RVs, that figure is expected to grow to \$6 million by 2022.

If the change is approved, it would mean an increase in nightly fees of about \$4 to \$6 dollars for the average senior or person with a disability. But then there's the principle of the thing.

"It's very troubling," said Hermach, who now travels with Ruth, 82, in their 25-foot Winnebago. "It's not right."

The agency is taking public **comment** on the proposal until February 1.

-- **Matthew Preusch**

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