

## **Kern Valley (CA) Sun**

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### **USFS: Eliminate senior, disabled camp discounts**

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Kern Valley Sun

The U.S. Forest Service has announced its plans to eliminate a 50 percent discount, traditionally available to holders of lifetime Senior and Access (permanently disabled) passes, at National Forest campgrounds.

The change will apply to concession-run campgrounds, representing 50 percent of National Forest camping capacity and 82 percent of reservable campsites.

In a notice in the Dec. 1 Federal Register, the agency outlined a new policy that would replace the half-price rule, a directive that has been in place since the mid-'60s, with a 10 percent 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.

"The bottom line is, it's hurting their bottom lines," said Western Slope No-Fee Coalition President Kitty Benzar.

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 percent discount must be offered. Most highly-developed campgrounds are now concessioner-run.

"If the US Forest Service could account for the billions of dollars they are already receiving from the American taxpayer, they wouldn't need to target seniors and the disabled in this way," remarked Peter Wiechers of Kernville.

The concessioner program has expanded during the past 30 years, moving away from a small 'mom-and-pop' business model to one predominately run a few large corporations, said Benzar.

Camping and outdoor enthusiasts throughout the country have voiced concern about the proposed changes. "It's probably a little unfair for the seniors and disabled who are on fixed incomes," said Oregon camper Lona Kutcher.

"I think it's wrong in these economic times for people to be taking discounts away," said Cole Champman, an RV dealer.

The change is possible 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 percent discount on federal camping fees.

In 2005, the new Recreation Enhancement Act took effect, replacing the previous authority. Under REA, lifetime passes are still offered, but the 50 percent 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, Benzar said.

The REA specifies that pre-existing holders of Golden Age and Golden Access passes can continue to use them in accordance with the terms under which they were issued “to the extent practicable.” That means they should be grandfathered-in for the 50 percent discount as long as the pass is not lost or stolen, noted Benzar.

“The Forest Service is not showing good faith by changing the terms of the passes after the fact,” said Benzar. “They encouraged people to turn in their Golden passes, which guaranteed a 50 percent 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 percent discount to both groups,” said Benzar.

“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,” Benzar said.

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.”

Sequoia National Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell did not respond to the Sun’s request for comment on the proposed changes. The public comment period ends Feb. 1. Comments can be submitted at [www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.html#submitComment?R=0900006480a60f36](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).