

Local News

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The U.S. Forest Service is considering changing a program that has given extra discounts to senior citizens and people with permanent disabilities.

The policy on lifetime Senior and Access passes may go from a 50 percent camping discount at campsites operated by concessioners on national forest lands to 10 percent.

Concessioners could offer a higher rate, but would be required to give 10 percent off for camping and standard amenity recreation fee (SARF) day use sites.

The lifetime Senior passes cost a one-time fee of \$10. There is no cost for Access passes for the permanently disabled. Those passes add up to about 77 percent of the total number of interagency passes sold by the Forest Service each year.

The policies for Golden Age and Golden Access passes, the predecessors to Senior and Access passes, would change to match.

"The proposed 10 percent discount for seniors and the disabled would be comparable to other market discounts and would be sustainable for concession operations, even with changing demographics," according to the notice of proposed directive posted Dec. 1. "The reduction in the camping fee discount, combined with the added discount and free use at SARF day use sites, would generate sufficient revenue to sustain viable concession operations and correct the unsustainable cost of a non-market based senior discount."

"These changes are both necessary and timely," according to the notice. "Furthermore, the proposed changes would ensure consistency and fairness in the Forest Service's concessions pass policy."

The existing policies were put in place in 1965 by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. Until the 1980s, Forest Service personnel operated and maintained most of the recreation facilities on Forest Service lands. Now, according to Forest Service statistics, "82 percent of the reservable campsites listed in the National Recreation Reservation Service are managed by concessioners."

According to the Forest Service, those concessioners have raised five concerns regarding the 50 percent discount: the Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004 does not require a camping fee discount for Senior and Access pass holders; a 50 percent discount is not comparable to other discounts in the private sector; the discount is non-negotiable so the concessioner cannot use it as a marketing tool to encourage off-peak use; the senior discount is "unreasonable" as the number of senior citizens increases; and the discount requires concessioners to raise fees on other campers, "discouraging a future generation of campers."

At SARF day use sites, the concessioners would be required to honor Senior and Access passes and offer a 10 percent discount. In the past, pass holders either were given free access to SARF sites or the passes were not honored and the holders had to pay the full price.

According to the notice, forcing concessioners to let pass holders into SARF sites at no charge, coupled with the 50 percent camping discount "would be detrimental to the economics of the concessions and could render many of them nonviable."

According to the notice, "Public comment on the proposed directives is invited and will be considered in development of the final directives. Comments must be received in writing by Feb. 1, 2010."

Comments may be sent electronically through www.regulations.gov, or by mail to U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carolyn Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage Resources Staff, 1400 Independence Ave., SW., Stop 1125, Washington, DC 20250-1125.

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