

# AARP Bulletin today

## Forest Service Proposes Big Fee Increases for Older Campers

By: [Chris Carroll](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | January 25, 2010

Steep discounts that older Americans and people with disabilities have enjoyed for more than 40 years at national forest facilities would end soon under a proposal by the U.S. Forest Service.

Currently, holders of lifetime passes—known as Golden Age, Senior, Golden Access and Access passes—get 50 percent off camping fees. In 2008, the most recent year tallied, sales of the \$10 lifetime passes to those 62 and over totaled 47,488—or 62 percent of all the passes sold. People with disabilities bought 11,991, or 15.7 percent of all the passes sold.

But private concession companies, which operate most [National Forests campsites](#)—including 82 percent of the reservable sites in 4,731 campgrounds nationwide—have told the government that with the proportion of older Americans growing, they can't afford the discounts any longer.

The proposed changes would not apply to National Park Service or Bureau of Land Management properties.

In a December notice in the Federal Register, the Forest Service proposed the plan to cut discounts for pass holders from 50 percent to 10 percent at privately managed camping facilities. The discount would remain in place for campsites that are federally managed. The agency also would institute a 10 percent discount for pass holders at privately managed amenities like picnic areas, boat docks and trails—a measure that could reduce fees at some facilities and raise them at others.

The public has until Feb. 1 to comment. Officials say the proposal would likely take effect in 2011 if it's enacted by Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell.

### **A real hardship**

Doris Gerhart, 87, of Spokane, Wash., said she was disappointed the government is targeting people who often have fixed incomes for such a dramatic hike.

"With the economy the way it is now, people have to cut back on everything except for necessities," she said. "Raising the cost probably will stop some people from going camping."

In a typical summer, Gerhart said, she and her husband might spend one or two weeks relaxing at national forest campsites and cabins. The cost of such a trip could rise hundreds of dollars, depending on accommodations, if discounts are cut.

A Forest Service official pointed out that no other federal agency requires private concessionaires to grant such large discounts. A 1965 federal law that authorized Golden Age and Golden Access passes mandated 50 percent discounts, said Jim Bedwell, the agency's national director of recreation. A newer law that authorizes the current Senior and Access passes does not require the discounts. To minimize confusion, officials proposed discount reductions on all passes, regardless of the system from which they were purchased.

### **A rise in older campers**

Private concessionaires are concerned by a recent Forest Service study showing the number of older guests with discount passes will grow disproportionately in coming decades, Bedwell said.

"For about 20 years, we've been utilizing the private sector in the form of our campground concessionaires to operate our most developed campgrounds," he said. "When they're providing that much of the program and that much of the value, you have to allow them a chance to be viable in a business sense."

A representative of the concessionaires said a negative reaction from people asked to dig deeper into their pockets is natural, though unfortunate.

"It will be sad if fewer seniors show up at our campgrounds," said Warren Meyer, spokesman for the National Forest Recreation Association and himself owner of a company that runs concessions in 11 states.

Meyer said concessionaires want to keep attracting older campers, and will likely try doing so with hefty targeted discounts during less crowded seasons. But, Meyer said, the industry has to keep the interests of various groups in mind. Nondiscounted nightly campsite fees typically run \$16 to \$18, he said.

"The problem is that we've had more and more people getting senior discounts," he said. "The subsidy the younger visitors were paying the older visitors was increasing, and we've had to raise camping fees as much as \$3 to compensate."

Reducing discounts will benefit the entire public, including older people and those with disabilities, Meyer said. Up to now, the Forest Service has been slapping fees on things like picnic areas and parking lots and giving them to concessionaires to manage. When campground revenue rises, fiscal pressure all around will ease, and many day-use sites that currently have fees can become free. "It's a tradeoff—shifting discounts from one place to another," he said.

### **Whose land is it anyway?**

But basing public land-use decisions on profitability of concessionaires infuriates retired Forest Service recreation specialist Scott Phillips of Hailey, Idaho.

"It's rude, it's offensive and it's arrogant that the U.S. Forest Service would even propose this monstrosity," he said. "Are they here to serve the public, or serve the concessionaires, and hand them profits on a silver platter?"

Ideally, Phillips said, uniformed Forest Service employees—not private companies—would manage the bulk of facilities. That's how it was done decades ago when he started as a seasonal worker.

"We took care of those campgrounds, cleaned the toilets, emptied trash," he said. "The most valuable part was interacting with the public and giving them good information about where the good hiking is, or where the good fishing is. Now that's gone."

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, a Colorado-based nonprofit that advocates for public access to public lands, was the first to publicize the proposed fee change in December. The group's president, Kitty Benzar, said that apart from the dismissive message sent to older campers and those with disabilities, switching the terms of the passes, which some people have held for decades, is unjust.

“People bought these passes under certain terms and conditions,” she said. “The Forest Service is proposing to change them on the fly.”

[The proposal can be read and comments submitted online.](#) Comments can also be mailed to: U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carol Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage Resources staff, 1400 Independence Ave. S.W., Stop 1125, Washington, DC 20250-1125.

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*Chris Carroll is a journalist from Maryland.*

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