

Missoulian

Deadline near for comments on plan to chop campsite discounts

By **ROB CHANEY** of the Missoulian | Posted: Friday, January 29, 2010 10:40 pm

Monday is the last day to send comments about plans to reduce elderly and disabled discounts at privately managed U.S. Forest Service campgrounds and other public facilities.

The change could affect holders of Golden Age, Golden Access and disabled visitor passes. It's part of the 2005 Recreation Enhancement Act's effort to bring fees in line with private market rates.

"It's not a repeal of the fee bill, but it's bigger than just elderly and disabled," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which objects to the access charges. "It sets a precedent where private companies get to set policy on public land. If they get away with this, there's no limit to what they can decide to do on public land."

Private concession companies operate more than 50 percent of the 4,731 Forest Service campgrounds nationwide, and 80 percent of the high-service reservable sites, according to statistics compiled by AARP.

The proposal would reduce the discount for lifetime or disabled pass holders from 50 percent to 10 percent at the privately managed facilities. It would not apply to federal sites managed by the Bureau of Land Management or the National Park Service.

Only four national forests have concessionaire-operated facilities in Montana: the Gallatin, Flathead, Custer and Beaverhead-Deerlodge. And only a small minority of campgrounds in those forests are privately managed, according to Forest Service Region I spokeswoman Rose Davis.

"In other regions, they pursued it actively because it was a matter of survival," Davis said. "Facilities were falling apart so badly. But it really isn't a booming business here."

Nationwide, the Forest Service has received about 3,000 comments on the proposal so far. But only a few of those have come to Montana Forest Service offices, Davis said.

After the public comment period closes on Monday, the Forest Service will file a response in the Federal Register and then publish a decision on the proposal. Comments can be mailed to U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carol Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage Resources staff, 1400 Independence Ave. S.W., Stop 1125, Washington, D.C. 20250-1125. Comments can also be submitted electronically at www.regulations.gov under the "Camping Discount" heading.

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