

Summit County (CO) Voice

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FS plan to cut senior camping discounts under fire

Posted on February 10, 2010 by Bob Berwyn



A U.S. Forest Service plan to cut discounts for seniors and people with disabilities is drawing some criticism.

Is the tail wagging the dog? Critics charge that private concession-holders are driving Forest Service policy at the expense of the public interest

By Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — [A U.S. Forest Service proposal](#) to slash discounts for seniors and people with disabilities at campgrounds and other public land recreation facilities operated by private companies has created a stir in the senior community, including [a blistering article](#) posted online in the AARP bulletin.

As proposed, the plan could cut the discount from 50 percent to 10 percent for holders of Golden Age Access passes, although it gives the concession-holders some flexibility in determining discounts. It also adds in some some new, smaller discounts at day-use areas.

Seniors who use the privately run campgrounds on National Forest lands for a couple of weeks each summer could end up paying several hundred dollars more if the changes are adopted by the agency, based on average per-night camping fees of about \$15 -\$18.

The changes would not apply to campgrounds and other facilities run directly by the Forest Service, but there aren't too many of those left. According to agency figures,

private companies now control 82 percent of the reservable camping spots in about 4,700 campgrounds nationwide, including the major campgrounds in Summit County like Heaton Bay.

Formal public comment on the proposal ended Feb. 1, but activists opposed to the cuts are urging people to contact their elected officials in Washington, D.C to voice their opinions.

The Forest Service and its private partners have tried to present the change as a benefit to the greater public. Forest Service studies show that, as waves of baby boomers reach the age at which they qualify for discounts, the number of visitors using discount passes will grow disproportionately. That could require greatly increased fees for other users. Cutting the senior camping discounts could enable the agency to cut or drop fees at other sites, including day-use areas, Forest Service officials have said.

The Forest Service claims the plan to cut the discounts is a question of financial viability for the concession-holders, including big recreation companies like [Thousand Trails](#), which operates Forest Service campgrounds in Summit County and around the country.

But that story doesn't hold much water for Kitty Benzar, director of the Durango-based [Western Slope No-Fee Coalition](#). For years, Benzar's group has been fighting against the incrementally creeping increase in fees for using public lands. Benzar said the plan to cut senior discounts a clear sign of how much influence private recreation companies have with the Forest Service. Benzar follows the agency's finances closely. She doubts that the private concession-holders are struggling financially — to the contrary, she thinks the change in discounted fees could amount to a huge windfall for the companies.

She said the proposal was driven from start to finish by the [National Forest Recreation Association](#), a trade group that represents private companies doing business on public lands.

“It starts and ends with the concessionaires,” Benzar said, accusing private companies of driving their own agenda at the expense of the public interest. For the most part, the Forest Service has been a willing accomplice, Benzar said.

“They've let the concessionaires get out of control. It's the tail that wags the dog now,” she said, charging that the Forest Service is creating a “parallel universe” for the private companies in which the usual federal laws that govern public lands don't apply.

Look for more Summit Voice stories on this topic in the coming days.