



Proposal would drop discount to 10 percent off

## Seniors, senators blast plan to cut campsite discounts

By Nate Poppino - Times-News writer | Posted: Thursday, February 18, 2010 9:30 am

The U.S. Forest Service is considering allowing private companies that manage many of its campgrounds to charge more to senior citizens and people with disabilities, cutting a long-running discount as the nation grows older.

For years, people holding lifetime Senior and Access passes or the previous Golden Age and Access passes were entitled to 50 percent off the cost of staying at campgrounds managed by concessionaires. But in December, the federal agency proposed shrinking the fee discount to 10 percent. Concessionaires would also have to offer a 10 percent discount to those groups at "standard amenity recreation fee" day-use sites they operate.

Forest Service representatives argued in a public notice that the change is necessary to keep concessionaires from raising fees for other campground users and ensure access stays fair for all Americans. Agency staff said Tuesday it may be some time before a decision is made.

The number of senior citizens in the U.S. is expected to rise to more than 20 percent of the nation's overall population over the next decade, driven by the baby boomer generation, and discounted campsites make up a growing portion of camping-fee revenue.

Other hospitality, travel and recreation companies have largely adopted a 10 percent discount in the face of the generational growth, the Forest Service argued. The agency estimates that senior pass holders would pay perhaps \$4 to \$5 more per site under the new plan. Other campers already pay an extra \$1.50 to cover the discount; that would rise by as much as another dollar without any changes.

In south-central Idaho, the proposal would mostly affect campgrounds in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, which often attract out-of-state campers, said Sawtooth National Forest spokeswoman Julie Thomas.

"It's a travel destination," Thomas said.

A comment period on the proposal ended Feb. 1, but people are still weighing in — including Idaho's four-member congressional delegation. On Friday, Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch and Reps. Mike Simpson and Walt Minnick made public a letter to U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell questioning the need for and timing of the cuts. They noted Tidwell has recently received general funding increases and \$650 million in federal stimulus funds for capital improvements and maintenance.

Groups such as the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition have criticized the change as benefitting private corporations on public land. But the industry has backed the proposed rules, playing up the advantages private contracts bring to the public sites.

"... Campground operation is not an inherently governmental function," wrote Derrick A. Crandall, president of the American Recreation Coalition, in his public comment letter.