

Forest Service Rejects Camping Fee Increase

By: [Chris Carroll](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | March 18, 2010

Public outcry has apparently scuttled a [proposal to raise camping fees](#) for older Americans and people with disabilities who hold lifetime passes honored at many federal campgrounds.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said Wednesday the agency would keep in place the 50 percent discounts for people 62 and older and those with disabilities at 5,800 [national forest campgrounds](#) nationwide. Other public lands, such as national parks, are not affected by the decision.

In early December the Forest Service proposed cutting camping discounts to 10 percent at campgrounds managed by private concessionaires, which oversee 82 percent of national forest campsites that can be reserved in advance. Concessionaires say they can no longer afford to honor the 50 percent discounts—offered since the 1960s—because the number of older campers is growing. With people age 62 and older buying more than three-fifths of lifetime park passes in 2008, according to Forest Service data, younger campers increasingly subsidize older ones, the concessionaires argue.

But after reviewing letters and online forms submitted by more than 4,000 people during a 60-day public comment period, Tidwell announced he was dropping the idea of a fee increase. “Particularly in these difficult economic times, it is very important to maintain affordable access to our national forests and grasslands, giving people easy ways to recreate and find respite in the outdoors,” Tidwell said in a [press release accompanying the announcement that discounts would continue](#).

The agency has not released figures on how many people commented for or against the proposal, but one of its leading opponents said the response

from the public and Western-state legislators alike was overwhelmingly negative.

“They angered seniors when they singled them out with this plan,” said Kitty Benzar, president of the [Western Slope No-Fee Coalition](#), which opposes the growing reach of private businesses on public lands. “Politicians know that’s something they do at their own risk.” Many veterans with disabilities took deep offense at the plan as well, she said.

Retired Forest Service recreation specialist Scott Phillips welcomed the news that camping fees would not increase for older Americans and people with disabilities, but said he expects concessionaires to try to shore up their earnings with other charges.

“The Forest Service is treating recreation on public lands as if it’s a commodity that can be mined like gravel, gold or minerals,” he said. “But recreation on our public lands is our birthright.”

Along with the announcement that the discount would remain in place, Tidwell also said the Forest Service would continue to allow concessionaires to charge pass holders undiscounted day-use fees at some privately managed national forest sites. Some of the sites include trails, parking lots, docks and picnic areas.

Earlier this month, an Arizona federal judge threw out a lawsuit challenging the legality of the day-use fees at facilities that, plaintiffs said, weren’t developed enough to allow concessionaires to legally charge for their use. But the court said the fees allowed by the Forest Service are reasonable.

Fee opponents say that only repeal of the federal law that governs recreation charges on public lands—the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act—can rein in the growth of privatization in national forests and elsewhere.