

Forest Service keeps senior camping discount

Recreation » Families may pay more to compensate.

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The U.S. Forest Service's decision not to eliminate substantial camping discounts to seniors this week will no doubt please recreation vehicle owners such as Dean Lang, of Sandy.

Others, including Orem concessionaire American Land and Leisure that operates 400 campgrounds in 11 states, are not quite as pleased.

Forest Service chief Tom Tidwell announced Wednesday his decision not to implement changes to fees charged to holders of Golden Age and golden Access Passports and Senior and Access Passes at agency campgrounds operated by private concessionaires.

"Each year more than 175 million people enjoy recreational opportunities on national forests and grasslands and that includes more than 15 million visits to our campgrounds," said Tidwell. "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 great outdoors."

The decision leaves in place a 50 percent discount for pass holders. The proposed change would have reduced that to 10 percent less than full price. During a 60-day public comment period on the proposal, the Forest Service received more than 4,000 comments.

Lang, who was camping at Zion National Park before the decision was made, said he had been following the debate on recreation-vehicle online forums. He said losing the discount would have been a "bad deal" after working all his life.

"It's expensive enough with the cost of fuels, an RV and equipment," he said. "This is one of the ways of still getting out to enjoy the country."

But senior Bill Robertson, of Bountiful, camped at the BLM's Dixie Red Cliffs Recreation Area, wasn't so sure the discount was fair.

"I don't think we deserve it," he said. "Young families pay twice as much as I do."

Steve Werner, vice president of American Land and Leisure, said that by not eliminating the big senior camping discount on Forest Service properties operated by the U.S. Forest Service, younger people and those with families will end up paying a disproportionate share of camping fees.

"We are disappointed," he said. "We would have liked to have seen a reduced discount. A third of our business and sometimes half depending on the part of the country and the time of the year involves seniors getting a discount. The way we have compensated for that is to raise the cost for younger families."

The campground concessionaire said that while many seniors can afford to camp, families struggling to make ends meet are forced to pay full fare at a period where they are just starting to earn a decent living.

"Nobody likes to see an increase in fees," Werner said. "But the cost of operating these places is paid for by the users. If we have less user fees, you have to reduce operations or reduce services to somehow make ends meet."

Werner said the Forest Service is the only federal agency still giving 50 percent discounts to seniors, with the National Park Service, State Parks and the Army Corps of Engineer not offering the big discounts any more.

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