

Climbers want campground open

Concessionaires temporarily reopen area near Smith Rock

By Kate Ramsayer / The Bulletin

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Climbers who flock to Smith Rock — even in the late fall and winter months — are asking the U.S. Forest Service and its new campground concessionaire to keep the popular Skull Hollow campground open year-round.

Aud & Di Campground Services initially shut the gates to the campground at the end of October, surprising dozens of campers who showed up last weekend. And although the campground company has decided to reopen the campground until the end of November, some rock climbers are advocating for it to remain open.

“It caught everyone off-guard,” said Ian Caldwell, a member of the volunteer Smith Rock Group who has been climbing at the site for almost 20 years. “The first weekend it was closed, there was a ton of people.”

He counted 26 tents set up outside of the campground on Nov. 6, he said — and more probably showed up that night.

Although he now lives nearby, Caldwell used to live in the Willamette Valley, and said he would come to Smith Rock on the weekends — even during the winter. And there were others camping as well, he said.

“We feel it’s justified that it stays open,” Caldwell said.

David Potter, owner of Smith Rock Climbing Guides, spent a winter at the campground when he about 19, and said that climbers, like surfers, will often go to a site and camp out for a while — even in the colder months.

“It’s kind of a traditional thing to go out and hit the road for a while,” Potter said.

“Closing it, I think, is a bad idea. People are going to still camp out there; they’re just going to extend out from the campground.”

Closing a campground, with its constructed fire rings and toilets, can also pose a hazard to the surrounding environment, Caldwell said.

“If you close the gates, now you’re sending campers to another place,” Caldwell said.

“They compact the soil, they make a fire pit, they use the trees as toilets. When that happens once in a while, it’s not that big of a deal, but when it happens over and over, they’re more of an impact.”

The Skull Hollow campground was built to help keep people from camping at scattered sites, he said, but closing it in the winter could lead to that issue again.

The Smith Rock Group is willing to help keep the site open, he said, although he’s not sure what form the help would take.

And climbers have been contacting the Forest Service to tell the agency that is it a concern, in hopes of keeping the campground open.

Caldwell said that he went out Sunday and on Veteran’s Day and got 110 signatures on a petition, including those of people from Seattle, New Hampshire, Canada, Paris and Germany, as well as more local hometowns.

“People are still making long-distance travel trips here in November,” he said.

The Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River National Grassland, like many forests, don’t have the resources and staff they need to manage Skull Hollow and other

campgrounds, said Lisa Clark, spokeswoman with the agency. In order to make up for that, they have partnered with volunteer groups as well as concessionaires to run some of the campgrounds — including Skull Hollow.

“For them it’s a business, so it does need to be economically viable,” Clark said. “And for those reasons, campgrounds close during the winter.”

Other options in the area include walk-in sites at Smith Rock State Park, West Shore Campground at Haystack Reservoir, and Cyrus Horse Camp.

Although the concessionaire’s contract states that Skull Hollow only has to be open from April 1 to Oct. 31, it has agreed to stay open until the end of this month, and then reopen a month early — on March 1.

“They’ve had a lot of inquiries from people, and the Ochoco has had inquires, so we’ve agreed to extend it,” she said.

The campground company has an employee who makes sure things are clean at the campground, said Steve Hunn, who owns Aud & Di Campground Services with his wife. And they’ll keep an eye on how many people are there, to see if it makes sense to keep the campground open.

“If we see traffic that justifies keeping it open year-round, we’d be willing to do that,” Hunn said. “If there’s snow and ice, we probably won’t have climbers.”