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At Mount Hood's troubled, beautiful Bagby Hot Springs, the possibility of change soaks in

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Jeff Taylor (left) and Mike Pfaffle share a large tub at Bagby Hot Springs on Tuesday. Taylor schedules his visits to the springs on days when it won't be crowded or rowdy. Randy L. Rasmussen/The Oregonian

The possibility of change soaks in at Bagby Hot Springs gallery (6 photos)

ESTACADA -- **Bagby Hot Springs** is one of those Oregon-in-the-70s places. Earth mamas and moon daddies lolling naked in half-cylinder tubs hewn from cedar logs. Hot water trickling out of the timbered hillside like somebody deep underground left the tap on just for pleasure. Huge Doug firs looking down, standing sentinel, demanding reverence.

Totally mellow. Unless someone clouts your car window in the parking lot. Unless they toss bottles, set fires, start fights and bring their pit bulls to the party.

That's Bagby today. Depending on the moment, it's either sacred or profane. It's fair to say Bagby is valued for what people wish it was, and the reality is a bit

rougher.

Something's going to give, especially in a time of tight government budgets and scrutiny of public spending. In an era when many believe some government services should be privatized in the name of efficiency, the **Mount Hood National Forest** is examining that option. The national forest, which has jurisdiction over the hot springs, may turn it over to a private manager.

Late last year, the national forest asked prospective bidders to indicate interest in managing Bagby and 64 campgrounds and waysides. Two unidentified companies responded to a prospectus in November, but formal bids for a concession permit have not been asked for or received.

The national forest plans a public meeting in January to discuss the idea and insists nothing is final. In the

meantime, the U.S. Forest Service replaced decking and walls, removed some of the older tubs, installed new outhouses and other work before halting for the winter.

Stoked by the tentative nature of the national forest's plans, the reaction to potentially privatizing Bagby has been as hot as its 136 degree mineral-rich water. Even beat up, worn down and rotted out, Bagby has a hold on people. Although they acknowledge Bagby's problems, longtime users, volunteers and forest watchdog groups are leery of privatizing a public treasure.

They worry Bagby will get the "Disney" treatment, obliterating its primitive and natural essence. And even if a private operator is totally enlightened, will they get Bagby?

"Our question is, is a company going to manage Bagby in a way that reflects the values of the people using it?" asks Amy Harwood, a spokeswoman with BARK, a Portland group that tracks conservation issues in the national forest.

"When I go, it has a unique feel -- it's a unique place. I'm not sure how they can come into a place like Bagby and know what people want."

A commercial "cookie cutter" management approach won't work at Bagby, says Mike Rysavy, executive director of the Northwest Forest Alliance, a Portland-based conservation group. He's concerned a concessionaire might close Bagby at night, limit soaking times or charge a daily fee -- it's free now except for a \$5 forest pass to park.

He believes management should be turned over to a non-profit that understands Bagby's history and culture.

"The Forest Service downplays all those concerns, but I think they're legitimate," Rysavy says. "There hasn't been any mechanism for public input."

Forest Service spokesman Rick Acosta says the concern is premature. The national forest has many examples of privately operated public facilities -- with majestic Timberline Lodge being the prime example, he says. Many of the campgrounds included in the Bagby package were operated by 1000 Trails, a company that held the concession permit through 2010.

The Forest Service hasn't made a final decision on whether to include Bagby in the package of campgrounds it may offer to a concessionaire this year, Acosta says. In any case, it would retain oversight. The January meeting, yet to be scheduled, is intended to solicit the public's ideas, he says.



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Water, 136 degrees and mineral-rich, streams into one of Bagby's older hewn cedar tubs.

"We know the ups and downs of Bagby," Acosta says. "What the Forest Service is after is to have a clean, well-maintained and safe site. I don't see major changes happening out there."

He may be right. An experienced campground concessionaire says the Forest Service will have a difficult time finding someone to operate Bagby and the campgrounds.

Bagby is much farther off the road than the popular Cougar Hot Springs in the neighboring Willamette National Forest, making it more difficult to monitor and maintain, says Chuck Shepherd. He owns **Hoodoo ski resort** and for many years held the permit to operate Cougar and a network of federal campgrounds off highways 126 and 58 east of Eugene.

Shepherd believes Bagby should be withdrawn from the campground concession permit.

"They threw in Bagby and probably now realize it was a mistake," he says. "The only ones with experience to do it was Hoodoo, and we didn't bid on it."

Shepherd planned to bid for the Bagby and campgrounds concession permit until he recently lost the concession in the Willamette National Forest after holding it 15 years. The Forest Service awarded the 2011 permit to **American Land & Leisure**, a Utah company that says it is the largest federal campground concessionaire in the country.

Shepherd says it made no sense to bid on Mount Hood National Forest after losing the Willamette permit. Although he and others believe American Land & Leisure will bid on Bagby, a spokeswoman says the company has enough on its plate with the new Willamette concession and isn't interested.

That suits some people just fine. People have soaked at the hot springs since at least 1880, when a prospector named Robert Bagby stumbled upon them, and it retains a sense of isolation that many users appreciate.

The site is off a forest road 40 miles south of Estacada, and reaching the hot springs requires a 1.5 mile hike from the parking lot. The trail is well maintained but can be tough-going in the snow. It parallels the noisy Hot Springs Fork, winding through old-growth timber and marked by a spectacular jumble of even larger firs that toppled decades ago and now nourish the forest floor. In some places, falling trees caught in the limbs of their living companions, and now lean silently, precariously, over the trail.

At the end of the trail, soaking in the tubs fed by rustic flumes and pipes, the natural order of things seems restored.

"Whenever people come to visit me from back east, I have to drag them up here," says Jeff Taylor, of



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Bathers have been using
Bagby Hot Springs since at
least 1880.

Portland, as he soaks with his friend Mike Pfaffle and with a South Korean visitor who introduces himself as Kim.

At its best, Bagby is a serene place, says Taylor, who's used the hot springs for years. But these days, he schedules his visits for times when it won't be crowded or rowdy. A Tuesday morning in the winter like today, he says, "Probably safe."

Jason and Jeanne Bristol, of Canby, lounge in one of the new tubs installed recently by the Forest Service. Like Taylor and Pfaffle, they acknowledge mixed feelings about the renovations and possible management change.

"It's kind of nice the way it is," Jeanne Bristol says, although she filled a bag with other people's trash that she'll pack out.

Her husband says a private operator might deter vandalism and provide better maintenance.

"But then," he says, "it becomes a profit center."

--Eric Mortenson

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