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## Forest Service Makes Case For Fee Boost

Residents urge more partnerships to cope with recreation budget shortfall



Tonto National Forest Service Photo by Andy Towle. | Buy a print of this

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The top brass from the Tonto National Forest hosted a public meeting to make a case for boosting fees for campgrounds and other facilities to a small, but intently interested group of citizens — who mostly urged the Forest Service to team up with local groups and volunteers.

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Payson Ranger District Head Ranger Angie Elam and Forest Supervisor Neil Bosworth were among the dozen rangers who politely took comments and tried to explain their dilemma — a \$600,000 deficit in the budget for running campgrounds, trailheads, picnic sites and boat ramps in one of the most heavily used national forests in the country.

Steadily increasing use and dwindling budgets have created a slow-motion financial crisis — compounded by careless visitors and an explosion in the sales of off-road vehicles. ORV sales have jumped from about 400,000 annually in 1995 to about 1 million annually in 2008.

“If people were willing to pack it

in and pack it out, we wouldn’t have such a problem,” said Payson Ranger District Recreation Specialist Rachel Hohl. “But they don’t want to drive (the garbage) to Phoenix. I see people pulling into the Star Valley Circle K to use their Dumpster to dump trash at the end of their camping trip. We’d love to have people consider sponsoring a Dumpster” at recreation sites.

The Tonto National Forest covers nearly 3 million acres and gets almost 6 million visitors each year.

The tourist-dependent economy of Payson and other rural communities relies critically on those visitors.

The proposed solutions discussed at the public meeting included not only imposing higher fees, but also putting an end to the rules that allow people to camp freely throughout the forest so long as no fire restrictions have been imposed due to dry conditions.

“There is no designated dispersed camping in the Tonto now,” said Forest Recreation Planner Greg Schuster, “but we’re looking into it. An example of dispersed camping is the fire rings and much-used campsites along the East Verde River off Flowing Sand. The Forest Service could place a stake and mark off the site 30 feet from the pole to place a stake to provide trash cans or toilet features.”

However, Kitty Benzar with the Colorado-based Western Slopes Coalition also at the meeting sharply challenged the legality of many of the fees proposed — as well as relying on private contractors to evade legal restrictions on Forest Service fees.

The Western Slopes Coalition has successfully challenged fees for parking at trailhead roadways to access public lands in the Coconino Forest near Sedona. However, the Forest Service can charge fees necessary to cover the operating costs of developing and maintaining campgrounds.

The Western Slopes Coalition has also filed a lawsuit challenging the Payson Ranger District from allowing a private contractor to charge an \$8 fee for people who park in paved lots near the tables off Houston Mesa Road, even if they just want to hike up the East Verde River. The Forest Service and that private contractors have to abide by the same rules as the Forest Service when it comes to fees.

The meeting in Payson stems from the rising recreation program deficit on the Tonto National Forest, which arose mostly from a decline in the amount of money the Forest Service spends on maintaining roads and other facilities.

For instance, in 2011 the Tonto National Forest invested about \$2.8 million in operating its vast network of campgrounds and other facilities and collected about \$2.5 million in fees. That produced a roughly \$90,000 surplus in the recreation program.

However, in 2013 the budget projects the Forest Service will spend \$2.1 million in “allocated” funds and collect another \$2.4 million in fees. That will produce a projected \$920,000 deficit in the program — a roughly 20 percent shortfall.

The looming financial crisis prompted the Tonto National Forest to launch a series of public meetings to gather suggestions from citizens on what it should do to close the gap.

Participants wandered around a room at Gila Community College examining poster boards with information about the problem and laying out solutions. The alternatives included shutting down campsites and other facilities, raising fees to wipe out the shortfall, turning more facilities over to private contractors and forming more partnerships to help cover the costs of running the array of facilities.

The Tonto National Forest includes a chain of heavily used reservoirs along the Salt River, including Canyon, Apache, Saguaro and Roosevelt lakes. It also includes a dozen campgrounds and day use areas.

The Payson Ranger District actually serves as a test case for the contemplated changes — especially using private contractors to operate campgrounds. A contractor already operates most of the Forest Service campgrounds in Rim Country and charges only slightly higher fees than Forest Service campgrounds elsewhere. Contractors can generally pay lower wages and provide fewer benefits for employees than the Forest Service, resulting in lower operating costs.

The most popular option on the list proved the formation of local partnerships, with higher fees trailing well behind. Almost no one said they wanted to see the Forest Service save money by shutting down developed sites.

About 41 people attended the three-hour open house. Comments posted on the bulletin boards often focused on an alliance between community groups and the Forest Service.

“Use more community volunteer projects to cut costs,” wrote one citizen.

“Tax outdoor gear, ATVs, fishing gear — and use the money to support recreation,” wrote another.

“Make the East Verde a Town of Payson park,” wrote one participant.

“Make Fossil Creek a National Wildlife Refuge and charge for entry,” suggested another.

“Coordinate with non-profit organizations.”

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