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The privatization of public campground management

by Cally Carswell

If you camp at a U.S. Forest Service campground this summer, you'll probably hand your fee directly to a host employed by a private company, rather than stuffing it into a little brown box on the honor system or giving it to a retiree volunteering for the Forest Service. That's because the majority of the agency's campgrounds are now managed by for-profit companies called "concessionaires."

Both the Forest Service and the companies regard the concessionaire program as a great success in public-private partnership (the term they prefer to "privatization"), and consider it an essential tool for keeping campgrounds open in a time of government belt-tightening and reduced staffing. Concessionaires relieve the agency of day-to-day maintenance duties and the costs they entail, allowing it to put its precious recreation dollars toward other things, says Paul Cruz, the Rocky Mountain Region's recreation program business manager. (The agency's recreation budget has remained relatively flat for at least a decade, and it's often dipped into to pay for firefighting.) Concessionaires use fees to cover the costs of staffing campgrounds and general upkeep – trash removal, cleaning toilets, maintaining water systems – with some left over for profit. Proponents say the system shifts costs from the general taxpayer directly to campground users. Where the Forest Service maintains its own campgrounds, the agency typically covers the cost with user fees and taxpayer money.

Opponents of the concessionaire program, however, believe tax dollars should be spent to keep fees low on public land. Public land shouldn't be managed for private profit, they say. "The revenue and the profits are private, but all of the risks are socialized," says Kitty Benzar of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which advocates against access fees on public land. "You and I are bearing the risk. If the campground has to be rebuilt after a fire, we pay for it, and then it's handed back to the concessionaires. It's a no-risk business (for the concessionaires)."

For a more in-depth explanation of how the program works, read [Concessionaire Campgrounds: An explainer](#). We analyzed fees at campgrounds in Colorado, which makes for an interesting case study because, though most of the state's campgrounds – 268 of the 336 in our analysis – are under private management, one of its national forests has no concessionaires, and publicly managed campgrounds are sprinkled throughout the rest. We excluded group campgrounds from our analysis, and for consistency, looked only at

basic tent sites without electrical hookups.

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