



NATIONAL FOREST RECREATION ASSOCIATION

Responsible Recreational Use of America's Public Lands and Waters

MEDIA RELEASE

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Forest Service Proposed Concession Campground Directives

WOODLAKE, CA (December 9, 2009)---2009 has been an amazing recreation year in the National Forests. Many young Americans, faced with severe financial pressures and even unemployment, but committed to exploring opportunities to recreate with their families, have visited the National Forests, sometimes for the first time, looking for low cost recreation and lodging. The US Forest Service and its concessionaires were proud to be providing this critical public service. However, our ability to continue to provide low cost recreation options for millions of Americans was being threatened by a number of inequalities in the Golden Age and America the Beautiful (ATB) fee pass program; therefore, the US Forest Service (USFS) embarked on an in-depth review process to consider the redesign of certain implementation aspects of this important program.

We place great value on the seniors who compose a large portion of our guests. Most concessionaires are organizations uniquely committed to seniors - what other business group can claim that over two thirds of their paid employees are over the age of sixty-five? However, the historic 50% discount that concessionaires have extended to seniors for camping in the USFS has simply become untenable. At a typical \$16 or \$18 per night camp site, there simply wasn't a means to provide quality services to the large portion of the public with Golden Age or Senior discount cards (sometimes as many as 50% of visitors) for \$8 or \$9 a night. As a result, rates to younger visitors and families have been raised over the last several years to subsidize the growing number of campers with this Golden Age or Senior passes. This simply was unsustainable given changing demographics, and it was inconsistent with the USFS' goals to encourage new, younger visitors to participate in outdoor recreation. The only sensible solution was to lower senior discounts to a rate comparable to the market level so that every visitor can pay a fair rate. Even at these lower discount rates, no other Federal agency other than the USFS requires its concessionaires to honor these passes for discounts.

We believe that the concerns regarding the proposed USFS fee changes focus too much on the discounts that are being reduced and not enough on the offsetting discounts that are being increased. As part of this comprehensive reevaluation of the fee pass program, the USFS set a goal to greatly improve the value, utility, and acceptance of the ATB annual pass. Currently these passes are not applicable at most concession-operated sites in the USFS (or any other Federal agency). For obvious reasons, the USFS could not collect the fees for these passes and

then require private businesses to provide free services to pass holders. A significant goal of these fee changes was to require concessionaires to accept the annual ATB passes in the future to allow free use of concession-operated *standard* amenity fee sites. In this context, the reduction in some Senior pass camping discounts should be seen in the broader context of a financial give and take intended to make it feasible for concessionaires to increase free and discounted use at other sites. This was consistent with the USFS' practice of charging market rates for developed camp sites and *expanded* amenity fee areas while trying to expand the number of ways to provide free access to *standard* amenity sites. Again, this requirement puts the USFS ahead of every other Federal agency, as no other recreation authority requires its concessionaires to provide free use to ATB annual pass holders.

Nationally – there are approximately 200 companies that operate as campground concessionaires on Forest Service lands. These include both for profit and non-profit organizations and the vast majority are small, family run businesses. Most of these businesses operate on a local or regional level and are integral components of their surrounding community. Forest Service campground concessionaires are involved in a wide variety of local events ranging from Chamber of Commerce celebrations, clean up days (on the National Forests), to the sponsorship of a variety of Forest Service educational and interpretive programs. Forest Service concessionaires have also been active supporters of the Forest Service's *More Kids in the Woods* program and are actively involved in a wide variety of local Forest-based initiatives as well

Concessionaires continue to provide critical services to the public that the USFS is unable to perform due to reduced staffing or budgets, and in this role, we have developed a deep commitment to the resources we manage. Over 90% of every camping dollar spent at concessionaire facilities is put into operation at the facility itself. Typically 45% is allocated to labor costs to operate the facilities, 21% to maintain and clean the facilities, and 17% is assigned to trash hauling, electricity, and other utilities. Of the remainder, over two thirds actually is given to the USFS as a concession fee payment, money that is typically reinvested in the campground facilities. In almost every case, the amount paid to the public for the concession rights exceeds (and often greatly exceeds) the profit made by the concessionaire. In fact, if there is any lesson we can learn from recent recreation budget cuts in various state parks organizations, private operators are a critical component to keeping recreation options open in tough budget times. Concessionaires typically operate facilities at the high standards the public expects but with much lower costs. And, under federal law, the USFS actually has more flexibility to spend user fees improving the facilities under concessionaire operations than it does when operating the campground itself.

In conclusion, the purpose of these fee pass changes was most definitely not to create a net fee increase to the public. The purpose, rather, was to provide new free use opportunities for pass holders while reducing future fee pressures on young families, all while still giving Seniors the types of camping discounts they have come to expect in most private campgrounds.

The National Forest Recreation Association represents and serves as an advocate for businesses offering quality outdoor recreation opportunities to the public on federal lands and waters across the United States. The Association provides an array of member services to the lodges, resorts, marinas, pack stations, youth camps, retail stores, restaurants, campgrounds, RV parks, winter sports areas, outfitters, tramways and other companies that comprise the membership.