

November 28, 2006

NO PARTNER, NO POTTY
Forest Service Policy Will Reduce Public Access

On Sunday November 19, 2006, the Denver Post ran a front-page story under the headline "Forest Plan Trims Access." The story describes Recreation Site Facility Master Planning (RSFMP), a USDA-Forest Service internal policy initiative that has thousands of recreation sites slated for closure nationwide. There are a number of important issues that were not addressed in the article.

RSFMP is a policy that threatens to impose a for-profit model on the management of America's National Forests. As one agency official put it, "In our development sites we've been told they need to pay for themselves, or we need to get rid of them."

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition estimates that RSFMP will close or decommission between 3,000 and 5,000 recreation sites. Many of these sites will be gated and no longer accessible. Closures have already begun on some forests, with little or no public notice. So has decommissioning, including the removal of drinking water systems, picnic tables, toilets, and fire rings.

But closure and decommissioning are only one aspect of RSFMP. The policy also calls for turning many sites over to private sector partners to manage. According to one Forest Service recreation manager, the agency has adopted a "No Partner, No Potty" policy that threatens to close hundreds of facilities because they can't attract a corporate manager. Thousands more are slated for increased fees, new fees, and reduced operating seasons.

RSFMP focuses on the Forest Service's developed recreation program, including trailheads, day use areas, lake and river access points and campgrounds. But similar policies are being embedded in forest Travel Management Plans and will bring the same approach to hiking, biking and equestrian trails, OHV areas, and even roads.

RSFMP will have enormous impacts on National Forest gateway communities nationwide. As sites are closed and fees increase, forest visitation (already in decline) will certainly shrink. Local, often rural, communities adjacent to or surrounded by National Forests will see a drop in the tourism that supports their economies. The removal of toilets and drinking water systems will have negative impacts on public health that will have to be addressed at the state, county, or municipal level. Economically disadvantaged citizens will find themselves ever more excluded from the recreational opportunities that have traditionally been available to them on National Forests. These actions fall hardest on those who reside near National Forests, and who make up over 60% of forest visitors.

The Forest Service cites plummeting recreation budgets as the impetus and justification

for RSFMP. While Congress needs to recognize the importance of our public lands and adequately fund their upkeep, a serious reality gap exists between what the Forest Service is claiming is available to them in appropriated funds for developed recreation and what Congress is actually appropriating. Appropriations for Forest Service recreation have actually increased by 22% over the last decade to \$433 million, but allocation of those funds from the Forest Service's Washington and Regional Offices to the individual forests has dramatically decreased. Many forests are receiving less than \$150,000 a year to manage their developed recreation program. Millions of dollars are disappearing into the agency bureaucracy without ever making it to a National Forest.

RSFMP requires that every Forest produce a 5-Year Plan that ranks all sites. Forests have been working on these Plans behind closed doors since at least 2002, and more than 40 of them are known to be complete. But only a handful of the completed Plans have been released, and none of them have gone through the public comment process specified by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Now that word of RSFMP has leaked to the public, the Forest Service has agreed to take public comment (outside of NEPA), but their management action decisions have already been made and the fate of many recreation areas, as far as forest managers are concerned, is already sealed. All 155 National Forests are required to complete their plans this year and begin implementation in 2007.

RSFMP is an out of control locomotive, but Congress has the power to slam on the brakes. All RSFMP planning must stop, completed plans must be scrapped, and implementation must not proceed. Oversight hearings must be held. A GAO audit of Forest Service recreation budgets is long overdue, and Congress must require one.

RSFMP is being implemented right now. Heavy equipment is poised to remove campgrounds, cabins, picnic tables, fire rings, toilets, and drinking water systems from National Forests nationwide. Time is running out for the American people to reclaim ownership of their National Forests.

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