

Jan 25th, 2010

Tom Tidwell, Chief, USFS

Jim Bedwell, Director of Recreation, USFS

Carolyn Holbrook, Concessionaires and Special Uses, USFS

Dear Mr. Tidwell, Mr. Bedwell, and Ms. Holbrook:

As a retired US Forest Service Recreation professional and deeply concerned private citizen I am writing to you three senior US Forest Service officials about the proposal regarding concessionaire operated recreation sites (published Dec 1st, 2009 in the Federal Register RIN-0596-AC 91) to eliminate the entirely appropriate and longstanding 50% discount for camping fees for seniors and the disabled that has been in place since the 1960's. It is stunning that you would propose such an oppressive policy.

Let's begin with where the pressure is coming from---and that is primarily the National Forest Recreation Association (NFRA) concessionaires who are whining and complaining that they are not making enough profit. They have been handed on a silver platter the unique privilege of operating certain NF campgrounds on public land. They have contributed no capital investment on their part because the taxpayers paid for the initial construction of the campground. Concessionaires pay no property taxes. Yet they continue to demand more. Their motives can only be ascribed to greed. So, as recreation leaders in the USFS you have a clear choice to make. Will you once again cave in to Corporate America (concessionaires, NFRA, and the American Recreation Coalition (ARC) or will you choose to properly represent and serve the general American recreation using public who after all are the owners of the recreation resource and the recreation infrastructure on our precious National Forests? You must choose the interests of the seniors, disabled, war veterans and the general public and reject the inappropriate demands of NFRA concessionaires and the ARC. We the people own the National Forests – not the commercial lobbying groups and special interests.

Seniors and disabled passes currently represent more than 78% of all pass sales. The USFS seems hell bent on raking in more of these “free fee \$\$\$” scraped off the backs of the middle and lower income classes. What a windfall. Have you no compassion for the senior and disabled citizens? This entire matter is beyond the pale of good sense, decency, and any sense of fair play. Is it any wonder that the American Public has in most instances lost respect for “Smokey the Bear.” He has become “Smoky the Tyrant”! What is the Washington Office Recreation shop thinking? I have to question whether progressive thinking is occurring. This proposal is the antithesis of winning the hearts and minds of the public owners of the National Forest system. Would it not be appropriate to strive for a modicum of trust and good will with your true customers and clients - the American people. To be blunt, if a business in the private sector floated such an inane proposal they would quickly be out of business.

Now for Part Two and this is where it gets worse - much worse! Purposely folded in with the seniors and disabled matter (as a bait and switch ploy) the USFS is also proposing changing the rules for acceptance of lifetime passes at concessionaire managed campgrounds and day use sites. The real overriding issue here is that the USFS claims that publically owned, but concessionaire managed, recreation facilities are not subject to the existing law ---the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA). This is a sleight of hand and a sneaky attempt to violate the law. Concessionaires cannot be allowed to follow policies that are illegal at USFS managed sites.

Another important fact about concessionaire run campgrounds is that the level of quality service to the public invariably goes drastically downhill. My personal experience with contract campground personnel (with a few exceptions) is that they could care less. Uniformed Forest Service seasonals used to effectively interact with and educate curious recreation users as an integral part of their campground management duties. It was a golden opportunity for the public to ask questions of a Forest Service officer. Questions were answered. Information was shared. Good will was built. Trust was promulgated. The concessionaires only interest is in pocketing the money. No surprise there. The important boots on the ground personal interaction with the agency and the public disappears. Bye Bye to previously productive agency and public one- on- one relationships.

Now let me get to the 800 pound Gorilla in the Room. Mr. Scott Silver of Wild Wilderness in Bend, Oregon has submitted to you on Jan 21st a superb input letter which brilliantly chronicles the historical malfeasance on the part of former Chiefs and the Washington Office that led us to this current disaster. No single concerned individual in the United States knows more about this mess than Scott Silver. Scott lays out the foibles of former Chief Dale Robertson in literally giving away the farm to NFRA and the ARC. Subsequent Chiefs were also culpable. This must be reversed. What has happened is a pell-mell rush to commercialization and privatization of our public Recreation Resource. Let me be clear ----The American Public has been disenfranchised and sold down the river. This insidious and cancerous privatization agenda is eroding away the very foundation of public ownership of our Public Lands. Privatization of our recreation resource and recreation infrastructure on public lands is the ultimate evil.

In conclusion I and millions of Americans firmly request the following four positive corrective actions:

1. Step one is to immediately rescind this horrible idea of eliminating the Senior and Disabled discounts and giving the concessionaires an illegal back door way out of honoring the existing fee law. (FLREA) Please do this now with no further back pedaling or bureaucratic obfuscation. I am sure that 90% of the inputs you will receive by Feb 1 will recommend the same.
2. Completely change course on your fatally flawed Recreation Management Philosophy. Instead of being subservient to Corporate America, the concessionaires, and the ARC—refocus on serving the American Public. Eliminate these ill-advised

“partnerships” with the dark forces of commercialization and privatization. NFRA and ARC are not the friends of the American Public. Derrick Crandall, executive director of ARC, is a huge promoter of the motorized recreation industry. The ARC is a motorized lobby advocating that Americans have an unfettered right to “cheap gas forever.” ARC even historically advocated drilling ANWR. I am not biased against motorized recreation in the appropriate venues following the rules. Properly done it certainly has a place on public lands and waters. I am however incensed that the USFS has been vastly and inappropriately influenced by ARC to the absolute detriment of the true public interest.

Concessionaires and the ARC have come to wrongly believe that they are not subordinate to the agencies but are full and equal policy decision makers. It is indisputable that they have been driving the policy bus on national recreation policy. USFS has been inappropriately hearing and heeding ARC’s voice loud and clear. This is wrong and must change! We the people are the owners of the National Forests and emphatically do not want to be “partners” in any way, shape, or form with these nefarious commercial lobbying groups.

The bankrupt philosophy of the USFS has literally been to literally “mine” outdoor recreation and treat it as just another extractive commodity such as timber, grazing, or minerals. We are all acutely aware that the extractive industries exploiting public lands for decades have paid a pittance of fair market value for environmentally-damaging activities. Rampant over-grazing is a perfect example. It is thus a further slap in the face to our sensibilities and wallets to try and turn outdoor recreation into just another commercial money-making commodity. This terrible “commodity approach” is dead wrong. Quality non-commercialized Outdoor Recreation to heal our psyches, renew our spirits, and tone up our bodies is a right and privilege of American taxpayers on their very own precious National Forest system lands and waters.

3. Please stop the never-ending (and often illegal) imposition of backcountry, river access, trailhead, and dispersed venue recreation “user fees” across the National Forest landscape. It’s akin to “recreation mis-management by bludgeoning the public with unrelenting fee extortions.” The heavy-handed fee debacle is outrageous. Discard the illegal High Impact Recreation Area (HIRA) concept—a ruse concocted by USFS to extort ever more “free fee dollars.” I will tell you that the public is furious with oppressive user fee excesses and the pot is going to boil over.

4. The two key words to rebuild your tarnished relationships with the American Recreation using public are transparency and accountability. These two cornerstones of sound governance have been noticeably absent in USFS policies over the last decade. You are accountable to the public, i.e. we the people. I cannot be more clear. Please respond with real accountability and transparency. We are watching. We will hold your feet to the fire.

You will detect a note of severe frustration in this letter. The bottom line is that I am a mightily upset taxpayer. I would not devote large blocks of time and energy to this issue if I didn’t sincerely care about the future of the National Forests. When I look into the

future at the start of this new decade I have grave misgivings. In my personal life I spend 90% of my leisure time out and about on the precious public lands and waters. I have been fortunate to visit public land and wild river venues all over the West. I visit at length with current USFS recreation managers and get an earful. Many of them are privately distressed with current policies. I am not a pointy-headed armchair philosopher. I further have the wonderful blessing of having many close friendships with retired Forest Service stalwarts who were principled and progressive leaders. They are deeply concerned with recent flawed USFS policies and lapses in simple good judgment. Where, oh where? have all the leaders gone!

Let's please immediately begin to turn this around. Millions of Americans are counting on you for immediate proactive stewardship to guard the true public interest in National Outdoor Recreation policy. Additionally, sound science-driven decision making is needed in all your programs. When overwhelming public input comes in on any given issue please stop jettisoning the clear will of the people overboard and doing the exact opposite of what the public is telling you! Unfortunately this happens routinely. Please begin to provide us with real leadership and stewardship. You make high level executive salaries. Please remember that your salaries are paid by the American taxpayers. You need to serve them as opposed to caving in to the career commercial lobbyists and special interest groups with a privatization agenda.

I thank you in advance for listening. Listening is not enough however. Corrective action is required. Please initiate progressive solutions and long-overdue policy changes to boldly address these important issues I and hundreds of other concerned citizens have raised.

"I think the Parks ought to be for people who love to camp and hike... and have renewed communion with nature. I am afraid we are getting alienated from that ideal. We lie awake at night wondering whether we are giving the customers all of the entertainment and all the modern improvements that they think they ought to have. But let's keep away from that, because once we get started, there will be no end."

-----Former Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes (1933 – 1945)

"It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the Environment."

----- Ansel Adams

Sincerely,

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CC: Idaho Congressional delegation: Senators Jim Risch and Mike Crapo and Representative Walt Minnick

FSEEE, Eugene, Oregon and ten other environmental/conservation organizations

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

20 retired US Forest Service leaders