

STEWARDS OF THE SEQUOIA

Division of CTUC non profit 501c3
PO Box 267
Lake Isabella, CA 93240

January 13, 2010

U.S. Forest Service,
Attn: Carolyn Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage and Volunteer Resources Staff
1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Stop 1125
Washington, DC 20250-1125

Comment on Proposed Reduction in Senior Discounts RIN 0596-AC91 Proposed Directives for Forest Service Concession Campground Special Use Permits

Dear Mrs. Holbrook,

We oppose the proposed Forest Service changes to the concessionaire fee program and the elimination or reduction of the Senior Citizen discounts for camping and other fees on public National Forests lands.

Stewards of the Sequoia through their parent organization California Trail Users Coalition have a Memorandum of Understanding with Sequoia National Forest for stewardship. We care about the health of the land & the trails. We are the largest on the ground volunteer group in the Sequoia National Forest. During the past five years Steward's members have volunteered thousands of hours, while performing trail maintenance on over 1300 miles of trails, hand built over 1400 water bars and cleared over 600 downed trees as verified by Forest Staff. Our volunteers have also planted over 500 trees to speed reforestation in the 150,000 acre catastrophic McNally Wildfire area. Our efforts have conservatively saved the Sequoia Forest hundreds of thousands of dollars, while maintaining recreation trails & preserving the environment. We have received awards from both State & Federal legislators.

1. Concessionaires should not be allowed to follow policies that would be illegal at Forest Service managed sites!

Under the Forest Service's new interpretation of the law, a concessionaire-managed day use site does not have to provide any minimum amenities, go through any public comment or advisory committee review process, or abide by any of the prohibitions on where fees can be charged. Here are some problems with the proposal:

- The Forest Service is prohibited from charging for parking. [16 U.S.C. 6802\(d\)\(1\)\(A\)](#)
So the proposal puts the parking lot under a concession and let the *concessionaire* charge for parking.

- The Forest Service is prohibited from charging for scenic overlooks. 16 U.S.C. 6802(d)(1)(F)
So the proposal puts the overlook under a concessionaire and let *them* charge for the overlook.
- The Forest Service must provide six specific amenities before they can charge a day use fee. 16 U.S.C. 6802(f)(4)
The Forest Service finds that inconvenient? No problem, the proposal will give it to a concessionaire, *the concessionaires are not required to provide anything.*

The Forest Service (and any other public land management agency) should not be allowed to let concessionaires charge fees that would be illegal at agency-managed sites. This is the underlying heart of the issue. Details about who gets what discounts are just tinkering around the edges of a fundamentally flawed interpretation of the law.

2. A large portion of our volunteers are Senior Citizens from whom the Forest Service now wants to reduce their small discount for camping. There is no doubt that many Senior Citizen's volunteer in National Forest across the country, perhaps the largest group of Forest volunteers is Senior Citizen's. The Forest Service has been asking more people to volunteer each year. If Senior Discounts are reduced or eliminated volunteerism by Senior's will severely decline, contrary to Forest Service desire to increase volunteerism.
3. America's Senior's have supported our public lands with their taxes over a lifetime. They have fought in wars to protect our Country. Many Senior's are on fixed incomes which cannot keep pace with rising prices. The Forest Service should not deny them the enjoyment of their public lands by reducing their meager camping discounts.
4. The public are being charged new fees in newly created HIRA High Impact Recreation Areas and Adventure Pass Areas with the requirement that fees only be charged where six amenities are provided. In these areas Seniors are currently given a 100% discount under law. We oppose the Forest Service proposal to reduce this discount to 10%. We further oppose the Forest Service recharacterization of areas where no amenities are provided as fee areas. The twisted logic appears to be that a concessionaire is providing goods and services just because they are charging a fee.
5. The community of Lake Isabella is mostly made up of Senior Citizens. Per the 2002 Census the median household income in Lake Isabella is \$18,000. This low income is no doubt typical of Seniors Nationwide. They cannot afford a fee to fish by Lake Isabella or to camp in their National Forest. The Forest Service should not be allowed to price our Seniors out of their public lands
6. The Lifetime Senior Passes cannot legally be terminated or altered. These lifetime discounts must be honored.

Over the past decade management of our public lands has been moving towards generating income. When was it mandated that our public lands be run on a profit basis? It was never the intent of public lands to be managed like a Theme Park. Public Lands should be supported with our tax dollars and they are, but according to Forest Service accounting

reports as little as 20% of the Congressionally appropriated recreation funds make it to the ground in our National Forests.

Why has on the ground recreation funding gone down by up to 50% while Congress has increased recreational funding by 22% over the past ten years?

The Forest Service has made it quite clear through the increase in new fees being charged to the public for camping and even just visiting their public lands, and now the proposed reduction of the Senior Discount that they need to get more money to the ground. The best place to get these funds would be to reduce the 80% overhead costs which the Forest Service is spending on an inflated bureaucracy.

How did we get into this mess?

- Renewable Resource Harvesting (Logging) has been all but eliminated on Public Lands, supposedly in order to save the forests, yet our Forests are being incinerated because there are too many trees from decades of fire suppression and lack of management. According to Forest Wildland Fire Statistics, Wildfire suppression costs have risen to over \$1,000,000,000 (One BILLION) a year in an attempt to control these unnatural intense Wildfires incinerating our Forests and Wildlife each year. In many cases these fires burn so hot they change the ecosystem and according to Forest Service it is unlikely these Forests will return in less than 500 years.
- We also pay millions of dollars each year to supposedly protect Endangered Species, which we are now incinerating at a faster rate each year, as well as permanently destroying their habitat, which we also pay millions of dollars each year to supposedly protect through Critical Habitat Designations, Wilderness etc.
- Our National Forests complain they do not have enough money to maintain the roads, trails, campgrounds, toilets etc, which in the past have been partially, if not totally, funded by logging permit fees or logging related projects.
- Our Forest offices are heavily staffed with Planners, churning out multi million dollar plans, which are never implemented because of lawsuits from Extreme Groups who are supposedly protecting the environment. The well-intended Equal Justice Act legislation requires these extreme groups have their legal fees paid because their environmental concerns are supposedly beyond reproach. The unintended consequence is the proliferation of hundreds of new groups, whose primary purpose is to litigate everything because it pays their six figure salaries.
- Forest budgets have been reduced, so staff has been cut. Of course it was the lower level Forest Staff with no seniority that have been let go, leaving Forest offices with an abundance of Chiefs and no Indians. Very little is accomplished on the ground, such as maintaining trails, or campgrounds, because they have no staff to do this.

Let us not forget when logging was eliminated we were told tourism and recreation would replace the jobs lost in local communities. Let us also keep in mind since the implementation of user fees, visitor numbers have dropped, along with an associated drop in tourism dollars.

What are some possible long-term answers?

Perhaps the following would be a starting point:

1. Require at least 80% of appropriated funding to get to the ground before approving any user fees or reduction discounts.
2. Require Forest Service to maintain a ratio of Chiefs to Indians. For every high-level management staff person there must be a certain number of workers to be managed.
3. Eliminate laws requiring reimbursing or paying for extreme group legal fees such as through the now misused Equal Justice Act. Require responsible logging or thinning to promote forest health, provide a renewable resource and generate money to pay for facilities and staff, instead of wasting money on Wildfire management attempting to control the incineration of our overgrown Forests.

Thank you for considering our comments on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Chris Horgan
Executive Director
Stewards of the Sequoia
Division of CTUC 501c3 non profit
chris@stewardsofthesequoia.org

cc:

Congressman Kevin McCarthy
Senator Barbara Boxer
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Senator Roy Ashburn
Assemblymember Jean Fuller
Kern County Board of Supervisors
Sequoia National Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell
US Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell
USFS Assistant Director Art Jeffers
USFS Director of Recreation Jim Bedwell

"Since being founded in 2004, Stewards of the Sequoia continues to be the largest on-the-ground organization of volunteers in the Sequoia National Forest. Our crews have maintained over 1,300 miles of trails and have planted hundreds of trees in reforestation projects. We represent in excess of 2000 members whose activities include camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, motorized recreation, boating, windsurfing and horse riding"

Promoting Responsible Recreation & Environmental Stewardship