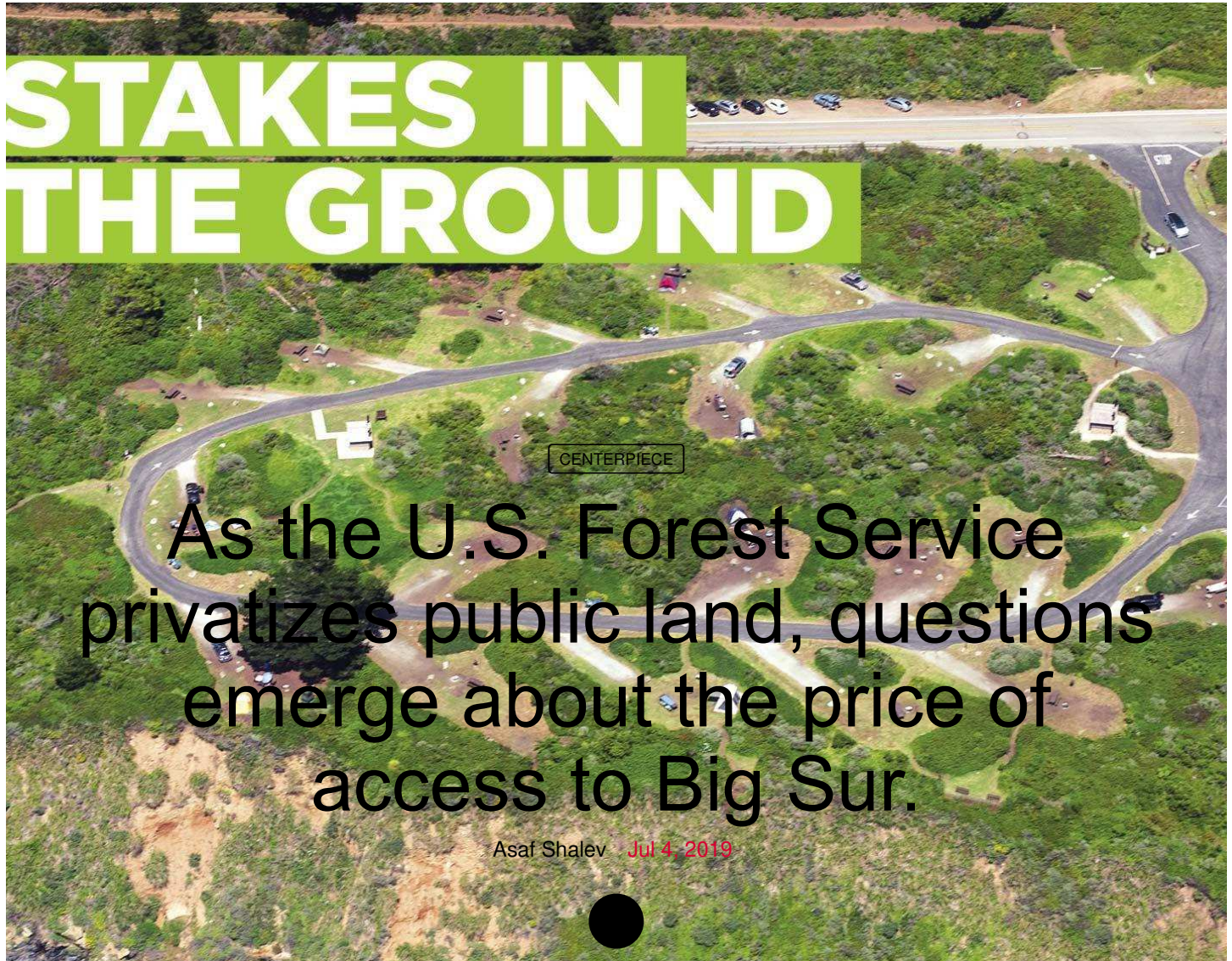


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In wintertime, pitch a tent at Kirk Creek Campground in Big Sur and position the door so that it faces the ocean. When it's time to wake up in the morning, sit up, unzip the flap and look out for migrating whales. You and a handful of other campers are situated on a 100-foot-high bluff with an unobstructed view of the blue.

Or, better yet, come in the summer, when the animals you might spot in the vicinity of Kirk Creek include bobcats, raccoons, deer and even mountain lions and bears. Access the waters below and angle for yellow perch or shoredive for jade. Head a bit inland and encounter waterfalls, redwood

groves and mountain meadows.

Scratch all that. This season, you have got no chance of booking any of the 33 campsites at Kirk Creek. The next available reservation is a Wednesday in October. Even the bigger Plaskett Creek Campground, located five-and-a-half miles up the coast and on the inland side of Highway 1, is all booked up for the summer, except for a few spots on an odd Monday or Wednesday.



Parks Management Company boasts about its recycling program but current and former employees say that the trash bags color-coded for recyclables just end up in the dump.

Nic Coury

However hard scoring a campsite may be, it's something of a miracle that the public's clamor for outdoor recreation finds any answer at all on this prized stretch of California coastal real estate.

The miracle rests on two foundations. Long ago, during an early scramble for California land, there was enough foresight that some areas were acquired and retained for public use. Kirk and Plaskett and other sites are situated on 1.75 million acres – bigger than the state of Delaware – of Los Padres National Forest; California State Parks owns the other roughly half-dozen public campgrounds and day-use areas in Big Sur.

Just as critical to the mission of public recreation, someone has to perform upkeep and maintenance. The job entails pumping septic tanks, removing cobwebs from information boards, handling bags of trash – which may leak or smolder or both – and dealing with throngs of humans. Take a peek at the logistical side of Big Sur and you'll find Waste Management dumpsters, utility trucks and construction yards. And that's without mentioning the impact of tourists behaving badly. It turns out that caring for campers is complicated and expensive, especially in such a remote region. Increasingly, the Forest Service has relinquished control over recreation to private concessionaires who would turn a profit by charging people to visit public lands.

### **THERE'S PROBABLY NO FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM WITH BROADER**

**SUPPORT** than recreation in the national parks and forests, and yet the funding necessary to support it remains precarious. "Democrat or Republican – it's not anywhere on anyone's priorities," says Jeff Bensen, the recently retired recreation program manager of Los Padres National Forest. When he started working at the forest more than 20 years ago, Los Padres had 22 recreation personnel. After Bensen's departure, 10 remain and they are responsible for covering the same 1.75 million acres. He left more than a year ago, and the Forest Service has yet to fill the position with a permanent replacement.

Bensen's tenure corresponded with a period of transformation for Los Padres and the Forest Service in general. Until the 1990s, the Forest Service ran its own campgrounds. But the era of shrinking government and privatization arrived and ushered in a new system of increased private concessionaire management.

"I didn't like the concession apparatus in the beginning," Bensen says. He relented because of the drop in staffing and the convoluted bureaucratic requirements dictated out of Washington, D.C.

Eventually, he came to wholeheartedly embrace the system. In one of his last assignments before retiring, Bensen acted as the architect of a new recreation plan for Los Padres. It was 2016 and the contracts of all six private operators in the forest were set to expire in the fall. They had been managing dozens of different campgrounds, day-use sites and trailheads in an area stretching from Ventura County to Monterey County. Now, Bensen had drawn up a prospectus for a single forest-wide contract. He was looking for a company that was willing and able to handle a special use permit that would include all the sites. "It was simply a matter of reducing the workload," he recalls. "Each individual permit had required a lot of administrative work."

The request for proposals went out in April 2016 with a deadline of June 15. Just over a month after the deadline, the Soberanes Fire broke out as a result of an illegal campfire at Garrapata State Park. The flames swept south, rapidly devouring tens of thousands of acres of Big Sur wilderness and destroying dozens of homes. For months, the forest burned. Help came from every level of government, including the headquarters of the Los Padres National Forest in Goleta. Bensen says

that the cash-strapped agency detailed recreation staff to the fire suppression efforts.

At the end of August, Soberanes was only 60-percent contained. Authorities were still issuing new evacuation orders based on wind conditions. Yet, amid the wildfire chaos, on Sept. 2, Los Padres' recreation team opened a public comment period for a matter unrelated to the fire. Interested individuals and organizations were being invited to provide input on Bensen's plan.

Central Coast residents are known for avid participation in public affairs. There's also an array of environmental organizations that watch and weigh in on everything that happens in the forest. But almost no one noticed the opening up of the comment window.

Then, a week before Soberanes Fire was declared over, the Forest Service dropped a press release. It revealed which concessionaire had been chosen, a decision reached with virtually no public input.

Bensen says there was nothing unusual about the process. "It's not a participatory system," he says. "It's not like everyone gets to have their say."

But having a say is exactly what many would have wanted, and perhaps no one had as good a view of the frustration that ensued than Bryant Baker. It was his first month of work as the conservation director for Los Padres ForestWatch. He recalls everyone around him scrambling to figure how the decision was handed down – how the watchdogs could have been caught so unaware. Freedom of Information Act requests were filed, supporters were rallied, a coalition of conservation groups assembled. The coalition penned a letter of objection. Whereas almost no one submitted comments before, now the Forest Service received emails from more than 140 people in a few days. But it was too late.

"The timing of the decision-making was terrible from a public input perspective," Bryant says.





Parks Management Company boasts about its recycling program but current and former employees say that the trash bags color-coded for recyclables just end up in the dump.

Nic Coury

**WITH THE NEW FOREST-WIDE CONCESSION DEAL**, an outdoor recreation behemoth was born and its name was Parks Management Company. Founded in 1995, it started out as one of the first concessionaires at Los Padres, eventually coming to operate 14 recreation sites, which helped the company generate a gross revenue of \$4.1 million in 2014, according to court documents.

Now, in 2016, forest officials were entrusting the company with 28 new sites, for a total of 52.

One challenge of managing these massive public lands is that Los Padres National Forest is divided into geographically separate areas. One is Big Sur, where Parks Management has long operated; the other starts some 50 miles south in San Luis Obispo County and encompasses land in Santa Barbara, Kern, Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

Growth almost inevitably leads to complications for a business, but, ironically, it was where the company was the most established – in Big Sur – that it soon came under fire, both figuratively and literally. (More on that later.)

Another challenge in the private recreation business is recruiting and retaining reliable employees: campground hosts, groundskeepers, kiosk attendants. Last January, Parks Management advertised for openings online using the same pitch as always: The job may pay minimum wage but you get to live on the type of remote coastal land that can't be had unless you're rich.

One of the people who responded to the ad was Ally Wharton. No one could have had an inkling of it at the time, but within a few months, she'd become so disillusioned with Parks Management that she'd embark on a whistleblowing campaign against the company. Her complaints would prompt inquiries by Monterey County's Environmental Health Bureau (since closed) and California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health, better known as Cal/OSHA (still open). State and federal rangers would be compelled to get involved. Ultimately, the question that Wharton's crusade would raise is much bigger than a single dispute: How should recreation on public lands be managed?

More than a year earlier, Wharton left behind her career as a business manager for Microsoft's artificial intelligence lab in Manhattan. She set out on the Appalachian Trail with her dog, named Bob Dylan. While hiking, she met a man named John Rodgers and they became a couple. Together, they traveled around Europe by foot before returning to the U.S. In October, they bought an RV in Maine and started a road trip across the country, all the while documenting their journey on a joint Instagram account with a handle drawn from their trail nicknames, Kilowatt & Blue. The first post introduces their story: "a girl and her dog, a man and his hammock – two solo thru hikes gone wrong and a love story going right."

Parks Management assigned the couple to the role of campground hosts at Limekiln State Park. This locale is separate from the federal Los Padres concession. California State Parks prefers to run its own facilities in Big Sur, but Limekiln proved too remote for the agency and it contracted with the nearest private operator, which was Parks Management.

Wharton had always wanted to visit Big Sur, and life among the towering coastal redwoods suited her well. The job itself also seemed like an ideal fit. Wharton was especially impressed when she read her employee handbook, which signaled a commitment to recycling. Parks Management was the "only business of its kind with such a comprehensive program," the handbook reads, noting 2,500 pounds of recyclables collected per week.

Soon, she came to feel like the environmentalism was only a facade. Signs posted at Limekiln and other sites directed visitors to remove recyclables from regular waste and put them in separate receptacles. But what visitors didn't know was that those trash bags – color-coded for separate uses – ended being tossed by employees into a single dumpster destined for a landfill.

Wharton objected to the deceptive signage, raising the matter with her supervisors, Marla and William Jungen.

"I don't feel comfortable lying to customers," Wharton recalls saying to Marla Jungen on about April 8. "What are we supposed to say to the campers?"

Jungen replied, "The correct verbiage is, we recycle all glass and aluminum," accompanied by an exaggerated wink, according to Wharton's recollection of the exchange.

The *Weekly* reached out to Jungen, who says company policy prohibits her from commenting on Wharton. But Jungen characterized Wharton's allegations as "spin." She says the costs of running a recycling program in such a remote area are "unbelievable," but that the company remains committed to the environment. "We always, always offer recycling opportunities," she says.

Half a dozen current and former employees corroborate Wharton's claims that the company has

stopped recycling. Photos and video recordings show Parks Management's dumpster in Plaskett Creek filled with trash bags color-coded for recycling and for regular waste. The matter has now reached the attention of the Forest Service, which is reviewing Parks Management's recycling program, according to a letter from Forest Service Ranger Tim Short to James Macfarlane, a Big Sur resident.

On social media, in interviews and formal complaints with government agencies, Wharton has leveled a slew of additional allegations over the past few months. She tells of a pattern of cost-cutting by Parks Management that has resulted in mismanagement and risks to health safety, as well as the environment. In each case, she first raised her concerns internally, emails show. The company ultimately fired Wharton.

Parks Management declined to respond to any allegations or answer questions, and instead provided a written statement. The company "has been part of the Big Sur community for more than 20 years," the statement reads. "We are committed to serving the public and partnering with our local stakeholders.

"Protecting natural resources and environmental sustainability are vital aspects of our organizational goals. PMC employees are our greatest asset and we take their well-being very seriously. To this end we conduct regular OSHA-compliant safety training and inspections at the facilities we manage for our partner agencies."

But Wharton and other employees did not feel safe driving a company pick-up truck with failing breaks and threadbare tires, they say in interviews with the *Weekly*. At Limekiln, facilities run on a 48-volt bank of deep cycle batteries, powered by a diesel generator. But those batteries, current and former employees say, had not been maintained properly and tended to overheat. The acid inside the batteries regularly boiled over and released toxic fumes making it difficult to breathe.

When notified of the problem, Parks Management supervisors the Jungens instructed Wharton and Rodgers to handle the situation by pouring jugs of distilled water directly onto the batteries every four hours. When they refused, citing the danger to their health and the potential for fire, the Jungens threatened to terminate their employment, Wharton says.

"I said, '\$12 an hour isn't worth my life and it shouldn't be worth yours either,'" Wharton recalls. "Marla responded with, 'We don't get to pick and choose our jobs.'"

The battery bank was eventually replaced, satisfying county health officials who had responded to a complaint from Wharton. But Jungen says that she had put in an order for a new unit long before Wharton spoke up.

Asked if the company has been cutting costs and making compromises, Jungen says, "My standards haven't changed."

Part of the problem with the situation is that it's very hard to verify. If the Forest Service ran its own recreation services, the public would be entitled to more information. But Parks Management is a private company and its not subject to the same rules of transparency.



The 2018 torching of the parking payment booth at Sand Dollar Beach was the climax in a series of acts of vandalism targeting Parks Management Company facilities.

Susan Perry

**RIGHT BEFORE MIDNIGHT ON MAY 11, 2018**, the phone of Joel DePola rang. Susan Perry, an administrative assistant from the nearby Pacific Valley School, was on the line and her voice sounded frantic.

She said was about to head home after a late night at work when she noticed a plume of flames across the Highway 1 near the entrance to Sand Dollar Beach. She knew DePola was a volunteer with the Big Sur Fire Brigade.

But when DePola and Perry arrived to take a closer look, they saw it wasn't a wildfire.



“I could see that the lot’s gate shack was totally engulfed and there were no trees or bushes involved, just the structure,” Perry wrote in her account of the fire the next day.

DePola and his girlfriend grabbed a couple shovels and headed down to the beach. Employees from Parks Management, which operates Sand Dollar as a day-use site, and from the Forest Service, arrived as well. They were able to put out the fire without it spreading into the nearby shrubbery. Signs indicating arson were immediately noticeable. A large wooden Parks Management plaque, for example, had been cut from its posts and possibly tossed into the kiosk.

A Forest Service spokesperson confirms arson was the cause of the fire and says an investigation is ongoing. No arrests have been made.

Almost as soon as the flames were put out, rumors began circulating that DePola was the arsonist.

He had been outspoken against a new Parks Management policy to charge fees at two day-use area that had always been free. The sites, Willow Creek and Mill Creek, provided some of the only public restrooms on the South Coast of Big Sur. “I was starting to become that guy,” DePola recalls. “The bathroom guy.”

DePola and others brought up the issue often and vocally enough that a member of the State Assembly created the “Big Sur Bathroom Taskforce.”

The evening before the kiosk fire coincided with a quarterly meeting of the Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council. The minutes from that night document an exchange between DePola and Parks Management officials. He asked whether the public can use restrooms for free and an unnamed company employee responded, “The public must pay for restroom use in order to cover the expense of providing the restrooms.”

The fee at Willow Creek and Mill Creek day use areas went from zero to \$10. At 46 of the 52 sites the company began managing in Los Padres, the prices of fees went up (see chart, above). Another change was that the Forest Service’s Adventure Pass would no longer be accepted at any of the PMC-managed sites.

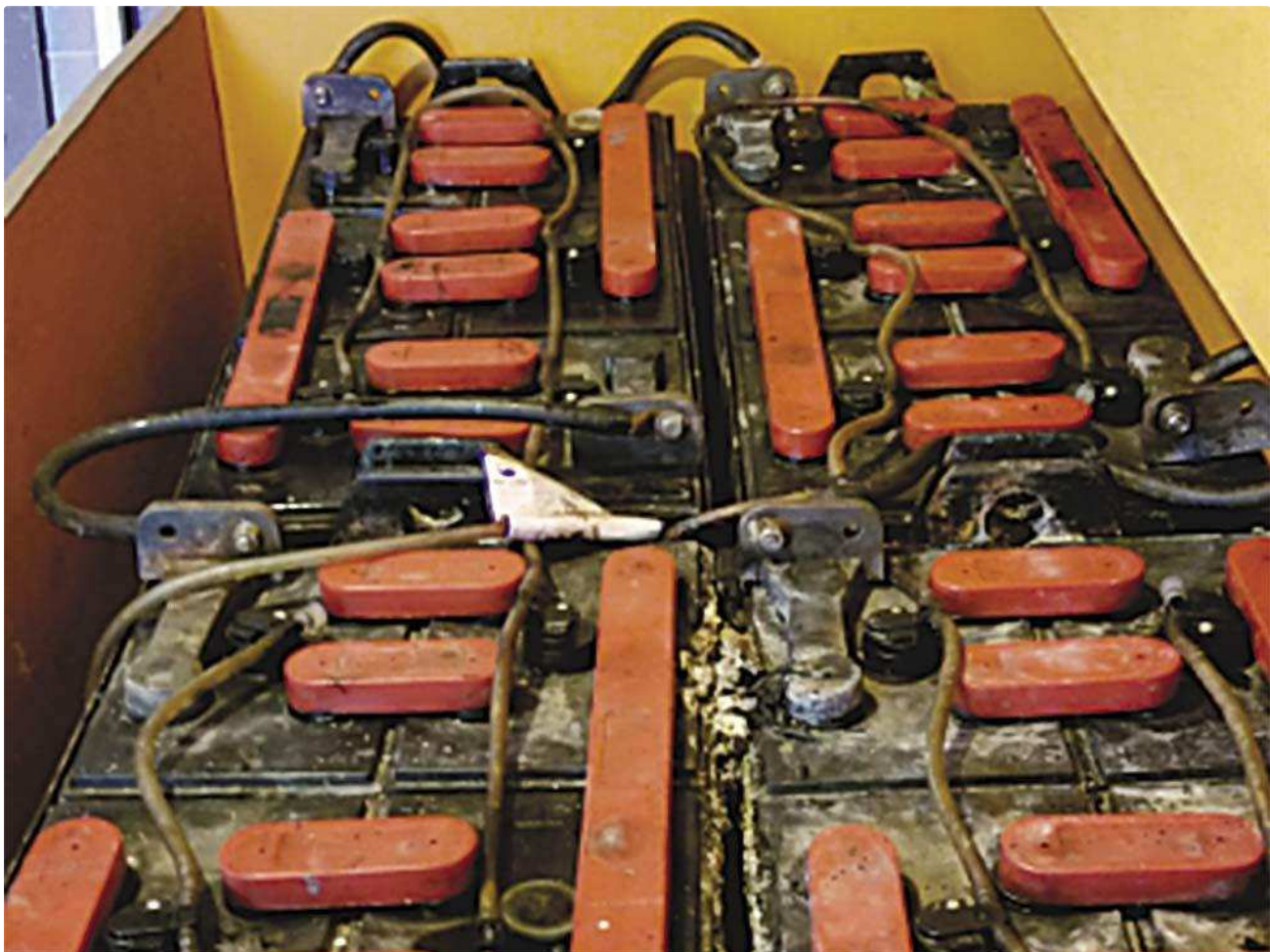
When it comes to a private company, it’s hard to assess the reasons for price hikes. But a lawsuit filed months before the company submitted its Los Padres proposal reveals internal turmoil that may have influenced business decisions. A former Forest Service law enforcement officer from Templeton, Shaun Corrales, owns half of Parks Management. His stepsister, Kimberley Cushman, whose late father Paul Kaleth founded the company, owns the other half. Corrales sued her in March 2016 in San Luis Obispo County, claiming that Cushman was siphoning money out of the business and failing to fulfill her financial duties. She then filed a countersuit, alleging the opposite.

An influx of cash from the new Los Padres contract could have been expected to alleviate the pressure from the clashing co-owners, but that money didn't arrive, at least not for a long while.

**AFTER CONSUMING 130,000 ACRES**, the Soberanes Fire finally ended in the fall of 2016, right before Parks Management contract took effect. Then came one of the wettest winters on record. In February, the ground under Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge slid, closing Highway 1. A few months later, before the Caltrans could replace the bridge, the hillside at Mud Creek collapsed and 5 million cubic yards of dirt and rocks came pummeling down, burying the road and reshaping the shoreline. Soon, the hillside crumbled at Paul's Slide and also at Ragged Point, blocking access from the south.

It would take more than a year for Highway 1 to be completely restored, and meanwhile, Parks Management had to contend with a drop in visitors. The company declined to discuss the impact of these natural disasters on their bottom line.

Bensen, the Forest Service's recreation manager at the time, says he didn't see figures from the company but that business must have been affected. Not only did the road close, but "they also had to gear up their entire operation at the same time," he says. "It was a very difficult first year for them."



When the battery bank used to power Limekiln was malfunctioning, employees say they worried toxic fumes from leaking acids could damage their respiratory systems and lead to a fire.

Ally Wharton

**TEDDY ROOSEVELT** established the Monterey National Forest through presidential authority in 1908. Eleven years later, it was merged into the Santa Barbara National Forest by Woodrow Wilson. In 1938, Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave the combined forest the moniker it still bears today: Los Padres National Forest, so named after the Spanish missionary priests who had colonized the coast in previous centuries.

Congress had empowered whomever was president to protect forest land in order “to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States.” Outdoor recreation was not mentioned as an explicit mission of the national forest system until 1960 with the passage of the Multiple-Use, Sustained-Yield Act by lawmakers responding to the increased popularity of outdoor recreation.

“There is no point in trying to explain this recreational urge of our people,” Rocky Mountain region forester John Spencer said in 1947. “Its existence and its imperious demands are demonstrated facts which we cannot ignore.”

But even as the budget for campgrounds, trails and staffing went up, the Forest Service could not handle the demand. Slowly at first, and then increasingly after the 1980s, the Forest Service began granting concessions to private companies that would operate recreational facilities for a profit.

“The end result of this increase is striking,” Steven J. Kirschner wrote in the *Wyoming Law Review* in 2014. “More than half of all Forest Service camping sites – 82 percent of camping sites available for reservation through the National Recreation Reservation Service – are managed by concessionaires. Indeed, many national forests no longer contain any Forest Service-managed recreation sites.”

The argument for private management is that fewer outdoor recreation facilities would otherwise exist because government services are both underfunded and less efficient. But there’s a downside as well: The law permits concessionaires to charge fees in cases where the Forest Service would have been prohibited from doing so. Likewise, companies have no obligation to honor federal recreation passes and can skirt certain public participation requirements when making changes to the properties they manage.

“Imposing a profit motive on federal recreational land management goes against the mission of the [Forest Service],” Kirschner says, but also acknowledges the flipside: “It’s difficult when you are sitting in front of a balance sheet to figure out a sustainable way to make sure all have access.”

**THE INCREASE IN WILDFIRES** has made the dilemma more difficult. “Los Padres is America’s number-one fire forest,” Public Information Officer Andrew Madsen says. Fire prevention and

response now consume 70 percent of the Forest Service's budget for Los Padres, compared to 30-35 percent in the 1980s.

Last year, Congress recognized firefighting was depleting the budget of the Forest Service and passed what's known as the wildfire funding fix. As of the next fiscal year, which starts in October, the cost of fire in federal forest will come out of a separate disaster fund, leaving other parts of the budget intact. It's been estimated that the change will free up \$1 billion to support the long-neglected parts of the Forest Service mission, such as restoring habitats and recreation.

For some activists, including Kitty Benczar, the budget focus misses the point. As president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, she fights remove barriers to access on public lands.

She points to the example of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which runs all of its own recreational sites without using concessionaires. Another example is the Tahoe National Forest, which recently resumed management of many campgrounds after decades of private contracting. California State Parks likewise maintains a commitment to running public campgrounds and is seeking to take back the operation of Limekiln from Parks Management, according to a ranger.

The argument for privatization "makes no financial sense at all," Benczar says. "There's an underlying problem: The Forest Service has made a policy decision to use private operators."

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## Asaf Shalev

Asaf Shalev is a staff writer at the Monterey County Weekly. He covers higher education, the military, the environment, public lands and the geographic areas of Seaside, Monterey, Sand City, Big Sur and Carmel Valley.