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Forest Service eyes Timberline user fees

A maintenance backlog of nearly $10 million looms at Timberline Lodge, which has stood up to Northwest winters since it was completed in 1937.

A weekend drive to Timberline Lodge to admire the view may someday come with a price tag.

The U.S. Forest Service, running short of money to keep up the 70-year-old lodge, is considering ways to charge day visitors who stop in for a stroll, a snapshot or to use the restrooms, but don't spend much money like those who stay overnight or ski.

"The day guests don't really pay for upkeep, but they're responsible in large part for much of the wear and tear on the lodge," Mount Hood National Forest Supervisor Gary Larsen says. "What we're looking for is a way to more fairly distribute the costs."

Timberline Lodge and ski area are commercially run, but the bill for major maintenance goes to the federal government, which owns the building. The government hired craftsmen to build the rock-and-timber lodge as a public works project during the Depression. It has since become an icon of Oregon.
Charging day-trippers at Timberline contrasts with those days and is part of a modern move to revamp recreation facilities in the Mount Hood National Forest as federal funding shrinks. The Forest Service strategy for the next five years also proposes removing facilities, cutting seasons, reducing services or raising fees at more than a third of Mount Hood's nearly 170 developed recreation sites.

All national forests are going through the process, and many campgrounds and other sites around the West face cutbacks.

Mount Hood officials want public comment as they try to focus limited funding on the best-used sites to serve the most visitors. Any decision at Timberline remains years off, though, and Forest Service officials will not say yet whether they will look at a toll booth or other options for levying fees.

They say they'll avoid charges that overlap with the state Sno-Park permit required to park at Timberline in winter.

Critics say the real issue is the federal government's reduced funding for public campgrounds, trails and other recreation sites, forcing a turn to fees that turn them into profit centers.

"Not so long ago we looked upon this as a public good," said Scott Silver of Bend-based Wild Wilderness, which fights commercialization of public lands. "We didn't look at people who stop in to use a toilet as freeloaders."

Jeff Kohnstamm, president of RLK & Co., which runs Timberline Lodge and ski area as a concessionaire, said he has an open mind about fees but serious reservations that it could drive people away from a cherished destination. "It's truly owned by the people. Oregonians love showing it to their guests and friends. The problem is, there's a lot of them."

The key "is for the government somehow to live up to its responsibility and its landlord role at Timberline," he said.

His company has lobbied Congress to pay for repairs at Timberline, he said. Recreation funding for Oregon and Washington national forests has dropped 25 percent since 2003, according to federal budget records. The Bush administration has proposed another cut of about 10 percent next year.

Timberline is the highest profile recreation site addressed in the Mount Hood Forest's new recreation outline. Nearly half the almost 4 million annual visitors to the national visit Timberline, but only about 15 percent of those stay overnight or go skiing.
Floorboards in Timberline's main lobby warp after a leaky heating system doused the floor with water.

That's important because skiers and overnight guests generate about 90 percent of the revenue at Timberline, Larsen said. Kohnstamm's company performs nearly $1 million worth of major maintenance each year in place of paying rent for the government buildings.

But that's not enough to catch up on the leaky plumbing, crumbling chimneys and other big-ticket repair needs. Something always seems to be going wrong in the aging building, adding to nearly $10 million worth of deferred maintenance needs at Timberline, Larsen said.

The Forest Service will look at fees on the roughly 1.6 million day visitors who make up by far the largest group of Timberline users but generate only about 10 percent of revenue - for example, through purchases of food or souvenirs.

"The hotel guests and the skiers basically pay for the 1.6 million day guests to use the lodge," Larsen said.

The Forest Service hopes to draw up a range of fee options within three years, then make a decision and start phasing it in within four years, according to its proposal. But Larsen said the fee cannot be so high that it discourages visitors, depressing lodge revenue. "It's very important to us that it generate revenue because if it doesn't, we don't have a way to maintain the lodge."

Kohnstamm echoed that concern. "We try so hard to attract people to Timberline," he said. "I don't want more barriers."

The Forest Service hopes to eliminate $2 million in deferred maintenance at Timberline by 2012, perhaps with fee money, grants or corporate sponsorships.

Proposals to address traffic congestion around Timberline Lodge envision day visitors parking near Government Camp and riding a gondola to the lodge. That idea remains far from certain, but if it happens, a day fee might be charged as part of the cost of riding the gondola, Larsen said.
Campgrounds and other recreation sites in the Mount Hood National Forest, especially smaller, lesser-used sites, would see reduced seasons and services as the Forest Service tries to cut costs through its new proposal.

About 7 percent of the 169 recreation sites will be shut down, more than a quarter will have their seasons reduced and 13 percent will see reduced services such as less trash pickup.

The Forest Service would install new facilities at a few sites - for example, by adding hot showers and electrical hookups at Indian Henry and Lazy Bend campgrounds along the Clackamas River.

Forest officials ranked each of the sites based on the cost of operating them and how popular they are, with the highest ranked sites getting priority for funding. Lower ranked sites are more likely to face cutbacks.

Several campgrounds along the White River, for instance, ranked near the bottom. Their season would be cut, leaving them open only from mid-May to mid-September. The Forest Service would seek outside groups to take over operation of the campgrounds and certain other sites such as Bagby Hot Springs, spokesman Rick Acosta said.

It's not yet clear whether the agency will be able to find such groups, he said.

Campgrounds around Olallie Lake, though they generally ranked higher, would also see their seasons cut to less than three months. Some would have toilets, tables and fire rings removed and services reduced, and would be converted to trailheads. Some trailheads would see reduced seasons.

-- Michael Milstein
michaelmilstein@news.oregonian.com

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Comments

DonGlicker says...

Give me a break!! I am getting taxed and fee'd to death!! I don't think Oregon Government will be happy unless they get 100% of my and your paycheck.

Posted on 11/13/07 at 1:13PM