Seniors may have to pay more to use USFS camps
Right now, seniors and disabled people get 50 percent off, but the discount could be lowered to 10

By Hillary Borrud / The Bulletin

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The Forest Service has required private companies that operate many of its campgrounds to give seniors and disabled people a 50 percent discount for more than 20 years, but now the agency has proposed reducing this discount to 10 percent.

The nation’s senior population has grown as the baby boom generation gets older, and more people are using the campground discounts. Between 2001 and 2006, 7.4 percent of the Forest Service campground nights sold by private companies were discounted, according to the Forest Service. In 2007, the amount of discounted camping nights increased to 11.4 percent.

Pete Martin, 73, of southeast Bend, is one of the people receiving the discount. He said it enabled him and his wife to make camping a large part of their retirement.

“When you’re on a fixed income and the economy is sagging the way it is, every dollar counts,” Martin said. “The national forests and (Bureau of Land Management) lands and national parks still offer the best deal around.”

A $10 lifetime pass currently gives seniors access to the 50 percent discount and other benefits, while a free lifetime pass gives people with permanent disabilities similar benefits. Under the Forest Service proposal, the camping discount private companies are required to give seniors and permanently disabled people would be reduced to 10 percent.

“We love to camp out,” Martin said, adding that he and his wife use their pass to get a discount seven or eight times in the summer. “I figure that’s a great benefit for those of us who have put in our time and retired and have some time to get out and see our country.”

The Forest Service has required the private companies that operate campgrounds, which it refers to as concessioners, to provide the 50 percent discounts since 1986, but it is the only federal agency that requires them to do so, said Karen Carter, a Forest Service spokeswoman in Washington, D.C. Concessioners operate about 60 percent of campgrounds nationwide, and “that’s why they’re such an important partner for us,” Carter said.
“They’ve made the point it’s been harder and harder for them to become viable as the senior population gets larger and larger,” Carter said. “They were convincing enough for the Forest Service to at least want to put it out on the table and consider it.”

Private companies operate 76 campgrounds in the Deschutes National Forest, Sue Olson, a spokeswoman for the Deschutes National Forest wrote in an e-mail. Local Forest Service employees have been instructed to refer inquiries about the proposed change to the Washington, D.C., office, Olson said.

One of the concessioners operating in the Deschutes and other national forests is Hoodoo Recreation Services Inc., which manages 150 campgrounds in Oregon and Washington. The current discount for seniors means that other groups that use campgrounds have to pay higher prices to make up the difference, said Chuck Shepard, the CEO of Hoodoo Recreation Services.

“It was ending up that families were one of the main groups that were having to pay higher fees because of senior discounts,” Shepard said, adding that he believes a reduction in the senior discount will make prices at concessioner-operated campgrounds more family-friendly.

“As seniors pay more, families will pay less,” said Shepard, who added that he is already working on discounts that Hoodoo might implement if the proposed discount reduction takes place. Shepard said his company might provide discounts for military veterans and for seniors and families during the middle of the week to attract people when campgrounds are less crowded.

“I think the way this is really going to work out is you’re going to see more discounts going to other groups,” Shepard said. The reduction in discounts by itself will not increase profitability for Hoodoo, Shepard said, although the ability to incentivize midweek camping might help.

Martin said he would prefer the Forest Service stop using private companies to operate many of its campgrounds.

“I suspect it’s more efficient to do it with state or federal personnel in these areas than concessioners,” Martin said. “Some of the people we’ve dealt with in these campgrounds aren’t very friendly. ... It’s sort of a take it or leave it deal, and it just rubs you the wrong way.”

Martin said if the Forest Service goes through with the discount reduction, he and his wife will probably try to find lower cost or free campsites somewhere else.

“I figure gosh, people pay taxes which helps support federal agencies,” Martin said. “I think the public lands we all own should be available for everybody to use at a very, very minimum cost.”
The proposal is open to a 60-day public notice and comment period, which started Dec. 3 and ends Feb. 1, 2010. The public can review the proposed policy in the Federal Register, Volume 229, Number 74, Dec 1. Comments may be filed on line at www.regulations.gov, by searching for FS-2009-0001 in the “Keyword or ID” window.

Comments can also be mailed to U.S. Forest Service, Attn: Carolyn Holbrook, Recreation and Heritage Resources Staff, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Stop 1125, Washington, D.C. 20250-1125.

Seniors and disabled people could lose the large discount they receive when staying at U.S. Forest Service campgrounds operated by private companies, under changes the agency has proposed.