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Forest service considers raising fees for senior citizens and the disabled

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Disabled people and senior citizens may soon have to pay nearly twice as much to camp in a U.S. Forest Service campground — including those in the Poudre Canyon — under a new proposal.

Today, if senior citizens or the disabled have a federal lands Senior Pass or Access Pass, they get a 50 percent discount on the cost of a campsite in national forests.

Management of most Forest Service campgrounds has been outsourced to private companies in recent years, and some of those companies claim the senior and disabled discount is too steep, according to a notice appearing in the Dec. 1 Federal Register.

The Forest Service has proposed reducing the discount to 10 percent, which means the cost to a Senior or Access pass holder for a $15 per-night campsite would increase from $7.50 to $13.50.

Roosevelt National Forest spokesman John Bustos and Washington-based Forest Service spokesman Joe Walsh declined to comment.

According to the proposal, no other federal agency offers a 50 percent camping fee discount for seniors and the disabled.

Though a federal law once required the discount, the Forest Service is the only agency to maintain it since Congress repealed the law in 2004.

The National Park Service, the proposal says, allows its concessionaires to decide for themselves whether to offer the discount, with most choosing not to do so. The full 50 percent discount is offered to Senior and Access pass holders at Rocky Mountain National Park.

The proposal says Forest Service campground concessionaires also are concerned that the discounts are becoming too much of a financial burden with the number of senior citizens skyrocketing. The result, they say, is to increase the cost of a campsite for everyone else.

A 10 percent discount to seniors and the disabled would be in line with other discounts offered at private campgrounds, according to the proposal.

Morie Smile, senior state director for AARP Colorado, said it will be one more fee increase seniors are being hit with these days with many services that were once free or discounted becoming more costly.

“While we know that many institutions are facing tough choices in this economy, we are disappointed that seniors and those with disabilities may now have fewer opportunities to access the splendor of America’s national forests,” she said.

Of the 55 public campgrounds in the Arapaho and Roosevelt national forests and Pawnee National Grassland — administered together from Fort Collins — all but one are operated by private concessionaires. Only Crow Valley Campground near Briggsdale in Weld County is operated by the
Forest Service.

The Forest Service is accepting public comment on the proposal through Feb. 1, 2010.