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Idaho Delegation Fights Forest Service for Seniors, Disabled

As Congress increases budgets for managing National Forests, the Forest Service not only increases the cost of using public land with runaway recreation fees, but also turns key facilities over to private companies that charge even more—and definitely don’t want discounts enjoyed for decades by seniors and disabled Americans cutting into their bottom line.

By Bill Schneider, 2-13-10

As reported here on NewWest.Net on January 28, the Forest Service (FS) has decided to take back discounts promised to elderly and disabled public land users.

To that, all four members of the Idaho Congressional delegation say, whoa, partner, not so fast on that one.

Or more specifically: “In this economic climate,” the delegation wrote in their official letter to FS Chief Tom Tidwell, “we cannot eliminate the opportunity for our senior and permanently disabled citizens to enjoy our public lands.”

The delegation specifically opposed the FS plan to cut discounts for “senior citizens and disabled Americans” under the Interagency Pass Program, which now provides discounted rates for activities such as camping in National Forests. The FS has proposed a new rule that would reduce the discounts from 50 percent to 10 percent in campgrounds and other facilities operated by private concessionaires.

In recent years, the FS has been rapidly privatizing the management of National Forest campgrounds. Now, private companies, large and small, operate about half of all campgrounds and 82 percent of those that can be reserved, which are often the most popular campgrounds.

“As the recession has gone on,” the delegation told Tidwell, “more American families have turned to our public lands for vacationing and recreation purposes than they had in the past. In part to address this rising demand, Congress has provided funding increases for the National Forest System activity in recent appropriations bills. Furthermore, the Forest Service received $650 million for capital improvement and maintenance in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. As such, we are confused as to why the Forest Service would find it necessary or appropriate to levy increased fees on seniors and the disabled.”

Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID) along with his colleague Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) have introduced a bill, S. 868, to repeal the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which is the authority the FS is using to institute and raise recreation fees and, in this case, to take back discounts given to seniors and the disabled.

To view NewWest.Net’s extensive coverage of the recreation fee issue, click here.
Here is the complete text of the letter, signed by Senators Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, and Congressmen Mike Simpson and Walt Minnick:

The Honorable Tom Tidwell
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Tidwell:

We are writing to express concern with a U.S. Forest Service (USFS) proposal to allow a decrease in discounts for senior citizens and the physically disabled on USFS lands, as proposed in the Federal Register on December 1, 2009.

As you know, the USFS is a participant in the Interagency Pass Program, authorized by Congress in December 2004. Congressional intent in establishing this pass program was to continue the multiple benefits of an earlier fee program (Fee Demo Program) by simplifying and standardizing the fee types and providing for public input in establishing fee locations and amounts, among other things. However, that authorization also provided the Forest Service with authorities – unused up to this point – to reduce discounts for senior citizens and the disabled in some circumstances.

Under the aforementioned proposed regulations, some pass holders will find the cost of recreation on their public lands prohibitive. Of equal concern to the actual economic impact is the demographic groups that it will effect; the recession has been especially hard on senior citizens and the disabled, who already must shoulder the burden of high healthcare costs and depleted retirement savings.

As the recession has gone on, more American families have turned to our public lands for vacationing and recreation purposes than they had in the past. In part to address this rising demand, Congress has provided funding increases for the National Forest System activity in recent appropriations bills. Furthermore, the Forest Service received $650 million for capital improvement and maintenance in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. As such, we are confused as to why the Forest Service would find it necessary or appropriate to levy increased fees on seniors and the disabled.

We urge you to maintain these discounts at their current levels. In this economic climate, we cannot eliminate the opportunity for our senior and permanently disabled citizens to enjoy our public lands.

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