

Erie (PA) Times-News

Article published Jul 20, 2008

<http://www.goerie.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080720/NEWS02/807200370>

11 campgrounds face closure

By KATIE SULLIVAN

katie.sullivan@timesnews.com

Ginnie Putnam and her family have been camping in the Allegheny National Forest for more than 40 years, making the Dewdrop Recreation Area their wilderness escape and family tradition.

That tradition could come to a halt if a plan by the U.S. Forest Service goes forward.

The Dewdrop Recreation Area is one of 11 campgrounds in the region that are scheduled to be closed as part of the federal government's recreation facilities analysis and Allegheny National Forest's proposed five-year Program of Work.

Money is the key reason for the move. The forest service says many of the facilities require too much work, and the water lines need to be brought up to current health codes.

Just how soon these places might close is unknown, but it won't be this year. Nevertheless, the news has not been easy for some to hear.

"I was shocked," said Putnam, a Millcreek resident, when she heard about Dewdrop.

She said she can't imagine going camping anywhere else.

"It's so sad," said Putnam, 62. "We thought it'd be there forever."

The Kiasutha Recreation Area, Kinzua Beach, Sugar Bay Dispersed Area and Tracy Ridge Recreation Area are some of the other areas facing closure. All together, there are 11 sites that could be partially or completely closed.

The estimated savings would amount to \$71,530 in annual operating costs, \$142,519 in annual maintenance costs and \$2,762,552 in deferred maintenance costs.

The moves have also left some wondering what might become of the properties after the facilities are closed.

Putnam said she feared oil and gas companies could lease the land and drill for profit.

"I think they want the drilling rights," she said.

Jodie Vanselow, a deputy district ranger for the Marienville area of the forest and one of the rangers working on the analysis, said there is a possibility that gas and oil companies could attain a permit for the land. She said there is no sign it would happen in the near future.

"Oil and gas has a right to access the minerals, but we'd do our best to mitigate

that," she said.

Vanselow said the forest owns about 3 percent of the sub-surface and can't control what is done with the other 97 percent.

One camper is doing whatever she can to keep Dewdrop going.

Sheena Niggel, a longtime Dewdrop camper from Corry, has been writing letters to government officials like U.S. Rep. Phil English of Erie, R-3rd Dist., asking for more funding for the Allegheny National Forest. She encouraged fellow campers to do the same. Niggel said she is not happy about the lack of funds for the forest upkeep.

"The government can find money to blow on projects that are stupid," she said, "but they can't find money for camp areas?"

Vanselow said the cost of maintenance is going up, but the budget is staying the same, causing a big problem when it comes to maintaining the sites.

"We don't have the money in the budget to keep the facilities up to standard," Vanselow said.

Allegheny National Forest receives about \$220,000 a year to maintain and care for the multiple campgrounds and other recreational sites that it is home to. According to the recreational facility analysis, all the renovations and upkeep would cost more than \$5 million.

"We're not happy with the reality of closing some of them down," she said.

Doris Allen, treasurer of the Erie Outing Club, said the group has been making trips to the forest area for a long time. They kayak and hike through the area and have used many of the areas that could possibly be decommissioned.

"I would hate to see future generations deprived of that opportunity," said Allen, 68.

Allegheny National Forest officials will be accepting public comment and input until July 28. Vanselow encouraged the public to comment on ways to bring in more money to the park.

"We're really looking for folks to give us input -- ideas on how we could do things differently," Vanselow said.

Vanselow said the process would take a long time, and mostly likely none of the campgrounds will be closing next season.

The best thing the public can do is to make suggestions on how to bring new business into the National Forest, Vanselow said.

@ To view more information visit

www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny/recreation/rec_facility_analysis/index.php.

KATIE SULLIVAN can be reached at 870-1880 or by email.