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## Umpqua forest visits drop 33 percent

[ADAM PEARSON](#),

To say most Umpqua National Forest visitors are old, white and male is not to dispense freewheeling commentary on the populace of Douglas County. The demographic, as recognized by the U.S. Forest Service, is the most common user of national forests across the country.

Yet the lack of diversity among forest visitors is hardly the most alarming trend for public lands use in the 21st century.

Visits to national forests fell 13 percent between 2001 and 2007, according to surveys conducted those same years.

Visits to the Umpqua National Forest stepped off a cliff, plummeting 33 percent for the nearly million-acre forest encompassing Douglas County's eastern pocket, Lane County's southeast corner, and smatterings of Jackson County.

But survey results are very preliminary, forest officials say.

"We're urging everyone to take those with a grain of salt," said James Bedwell, director of recreation and other resource programs for the Forest Service.

Not disputing the fact that forest visits are at best flat to declining, Bedwell said survey results on the Umpqua — which dropped from 1.14 million visits in 2001 down to the 756,000 visits logged in 2007 — are a good indication the studies were performed with different methodologies. (To see all results, go to <http://tinyurl.com/5q72w7>.)

It had been at least 20 years, Bedwell said, since the Forest Service had conducted surveys before 2001. Between the two surveys taken this decade, he insists there were many assumptions taken out of the formulas between the first round and second round.

"We just learned a lot in what it takes to do this," Bedwell said from his office in Washington, D.C.

With forest visits to the Umpqua jumping off the page, Bedwell points to another set of numbers between surveys that don't mesh: visitors who hunt.

The percentage of Umpqua visitors who participated in hunting in 2007 spiked to 32 percent from 15 percent in 2001.

Given the overall decline in hunting in national forests across the country — including in those near rural areas — Bedwell said those percentages don't make sense.

Statisticians, Bedwell said, usually don't jump to any conclusions until they have at least four different sets of data. In that sense, he said the Forest Service still has two more surveys to conduct — they now take place every five years — before the agency can point to any conclusive numbers that show a decline in visitors.

However, the Forest Service seems fairly convinced from recent surveys that visitors are grayer, pale and male.

Bedwell credits Forest Service programs such as "Kids in the Woods" for introducing newer generations glued to computers, TVs and video games to the enjoyment of activities in the outdoors. He said the Forest Service recognizes the importance of introducing all ethnicities of the United States to the health benefits of recreating in the outdoors, as well as the economic benefits for rural communities no longer flush with cash from natural resources industries.

"We have concerns about staying engaged with kids," he said.

The Umpqua National Forest just recently hired a director of recreation after the position was left vacant for years.

However, Cindy Pack, recreation planner for the Cottage Grove District, said she's seen a significant increase in visitors in recent years.

Pack said forests that are closer to more urban areas, such as Eugene, tend to do better in visitor numbers. She also surmises the growth in visitors to the Cottage Grove District is due to wildfire damaging recreation areas and campgrounds in western sections of the Willamette National Forest near Eugene.

Pack also said that visitor numbers for the Umpqua may have dropped significantly from one survey to the next because the second round began while Diamond Lake — recognized as the Umpqua National Forest's most popular camping and recreation spot — was still recovering as a fishery from a rotenone application that eradicated tui chub, a habitat-damaging, non-native fish.

"They say (visitor numbers) have essentially gone back," Pack said.

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