

THE DURANGO HERALD

Campers don't like private operators

Coalition's survey shows frustrations with concessionaires

by Dale Rodebaugh
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Visitors to U.S. Forest Service campgrounds are unhappy to find a private concessionaire instead of a federal uniformed forester at the entrance to national forest campgrounds, a Western Slope No-Fee Coalition study says.

There was overwhelming sentiment that federal land should be managed by a public agency - or at least volunteers - and not a private business.

- Kitty Benzar, president, No-Fee Coalition

The unexpected finding turned up when the group analyzed 4,100 responses to a Forest Service request late last year for comment on a proposed reduction in camping discounts for senior citizens and people with disabilities, No-Fee President Kitty Benzar said last week. The responses were acquired through a Freedom of Information Act request.

While the Forest Service in March decided not to reduce campground discounts enjoyed by the elderly and people with disabilities from 50 percent to 10 percent, the number of unsolicited comments unfavorable to concessionaires was startling, Benzar said.

"I'd say nine of every 10 responses mentioned concessionaries when it wasn't even part of the survey," Benzar said. "There was overwhelming sentiment that federal land should be managed by a public agency - or at least volunteers - and not a private business."

The general tenor of the comments - from 50 states, the District of Columbia and three Canadian provinces - is that concessionaires are interested only in profit and don't have the same sense of stewardship of the land and natural resources as Forest Service employees, Benzar said.

A review of the responses by The Durango Herald found national park users upset about camping fee increases over the years. They saw the proposed reduction in the discount as a disguised effort by concessionaires to increase profits. The Herald review found an estimated 50 percent of respondents put concessionaires in an unfavorable light.

Asked to comment on the number of unsolicited references to concessionaires, a Forest Service spokesman in Washington said in a statement: "We appreciate that a significant number of people took the time to submit comments and expressed their heartfelt interest in national forest and grassland recreation. The Forest Service found their comments included some good ideas for improving the Forest Service recreation program. We value this feedback and will continue to utilize it as appropriate to ensure that these special places can be enjoyed today and by future generations."

A request to address the concessionaire issue specifically brought this response Monday from press officer Joe Walsh: "The statement speaks for itself," Walsh said. "We're not going any further."

The operation of the 47 campgrounds in the 1.9 million-acre San Juan National Forest - the closest to Durango are Junction Creek and Haviland Lake - are under contract to a new concessionaire this year - Rocky Mountain Recreation based in Valencia, Calif. Dave Baker, the Forest Service program leader for recreation and wilderness in Durango, said only one other bid was received, from Recreation Resource Management of America of Lakeside, Ariz.

Baker said that based on a three-year average, a concessionaire with the San Juan National Forest collects \$500,000 in fees annually. He said 10 percent is reserved for deferred maintenance. Concessionaires then pay their business expenses, and the remainder is profit. Baker estimated that concessionaires earn 3 to 5 percent profit.

Will Newman, vice president for operations at Rocky Mountain Recreation, has a different take on the role of concessionaires. Property management is a business and has to be managed as such, said Newman, who oversaw contracts for the National Park Service before moving to the private sector.

As a private business, Rocky Mountain must bid on jobs, has a payroll to meet, pays transient occupancy tax the same as hotels as well as local, state and federal taxes, and it returns 10 percent of its profit to the Forest Service, Newman said. Private companies also buy locally, a stimulus to the economy, he said.

Public agencies 20 years ago began turning to private contractors, which are more nimble in many aspects of business than governmental agencies, Newman said. He cited the use of scavenger companies to empty garbage cans and the ability of private industry to spend money on improvements when necessary without waiting for someone else's budget process.

"We don't set fees for campgrounds," Newman said. "When a prospectus comes out, we do a survey and put in a bid. We have to be aware of regional costs and of (bidding by) competitors."

Rocky Mountain's contract with the San Juan National Forest is for five years with an option for a second five years.

While the Forest Service backed away from reducing the discount for senior citizens and people with disabilities at overnight campgrounds, uncertainties remain, Benzar said. The new concessionaire could increase fees for overnight camping and apparently is under no obligation to honor day-use passes (she cited an internal Forest Service briefing paper). If the Forest Service itself operated campgrounds, it would be required by law to do so, Benzar said.

A pass good for one year costs able-bodied people \$80. The pass is \$10 for seniors and free for people with disabilities.

There are other nettlesome issues, Benzar said. The Forest Service hires concessionaires without public input, and concessionaire fee increases are decided administratively, again without public comment, she said.

“By turning a site over to private management, the Forest Service is bypassing federal requirements, not to mention oversight by Congress and the public.”

daler@durangoherald.com

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1. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 9:48:27 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Pete says...

Hey folks, who runs DMR? One of those nasty concessionaires? A lot of the experience in a campground or other attraction on public land (managed by city, state, county or federal organizations) revolves around how well services are delivered. Ice in the store, hook ups that work, fire pits cleaned out, roads maintained, bathrooms clean and stocked, noise rules etc. How many govt. employed 'stewards' with degrees in outdoorsy pursuits, take money at the entrance, clean pit toilets, pick up trash and so on. I am in favor of well run private companies, selected and retained through open bidding, managing the operations and letting a few rangers conduct the nature walks, evening fireside talks and slide shows, with more senior 'rangers' assuring that the concessionaires do their jobs to an established acceptable standard.

With regard to one post that suggests that we shouldn't have to pay for public lands use because we all pay too much tax as it is, the Federal Government collects about \$500billion less per year than it spends right now. Something doesn't work and everything needs to be examined. We have to do more with less or at least the same with out more.

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2. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 9:29:42 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Against Communism says...

Treehugger.....you are an idiot. Do you even understand that those seniors you are talking about with the gas-hog motorhomes actually earned the right to be where they are because they have worked their whole lives.....yes WORKED.....a concept lost on so many today. They earned their money to be able to enjoy what few years they have left. I would suspect the concept of WORK is lost on you and you feel that the government should control every aspect of your life with no questions asked. I find it very disturbing that private industry is allowed to manage even a small portion of our public land for profit. There are plenty of volunteers, senior citizens and others, who would love to be able to park for free while taking care of the campground and they would be a darn site more friendly than somebody hired to do it. Private industry should not be allowed to manage any portion of our public lands.

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3. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 9:13:00 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Michael Williams says...

The previous comments confuse two distinct issues: Paying to recreate, and privatizing public service.

Protecting and preserving wildlands costs money. You can pay at the trailhead, the campground, or on April 15. Take your pick.

But public lands should NOT be managed for profit, which means the private recreation industry has no business managing them.

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4. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 9:11:39 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

king says...

WHAT! Let the government run campgrounds and public lands? SOCIALISM!!! Another example of Obama forcing us into a socialistic state! Rally, Teabaggers, rally! I don't want some government bureaucrat telling me who I can have come to a campground supper!

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5. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:34:38 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Cece says...

Wow I am not the only one Np and natash9 you too! The folks who take care of Vallecito are very rude unhappy people. My family has been going there for years and years and if I see its them I turn around and go back home. We went up for just a drive and pulled into the picnic area just to change a diaper the guy gave me a ticket for pulling in there and I took the diaper with me! We too got ticketed for having a friend for dinner. The fees plus the habitat stamp plus the cost of the tickets. I think I will pitch a tent in the back year.

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6. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:24:59 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Doug says...

We have private contractors operating prisons and armies too. So we need to see who benefits from this. It isn't citizens, but lobbysts for special interest groups and public

officials on the take. Example: One prison in Colorado is owned by the wives of judges. Conflict of interest for sure.

The problem isn't the contractors, it's the government.

Tree hugger is right about one thing: Who wants to see a city of RVs in the wilderness? Like Edward Abbey says, the roads should be unpaved and if you can't get into those areas by Jeep, horseback or hiking-stay home!

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7. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:23:38 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Harley is right! says...

The govt thinks they own all this land, they dont! We do folks, we shouldn't even be getting charged to use OUR PUBLIC lands! We pay enough taxes already that is supposed to pay for this.

The forest service is a joke, employed by mostly "tree huggers" who spend all day driving around in a \$40K tax payer funded truck doing nothing except writing tickets to people who are parked too far off the road. They can't manage a forest to save their lives, obviously as they are all burning down due to stress, drought and improper management.

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8. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:13:32 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

geewalt says...

Make that " We ARE NOT the ones wishing to exclude....."

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9. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:11:18 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

geewalt says...

Treehugger has it all wrong, most of us seniors dont own motorhomes , dont go to movies because of prices , noise, and garbage onscreen.

We usually go to places where we can afford to go on day trips,have fixed incomes and high medical bills. We Have allready paid high taxes for too many years,and bought the passes garenteering us the right to use part of the public lands we can access. We are the ones wishing to exclude a part of the population who paid for all that you see before you. If you believe that more fees are needed,contribute them out of your pocket. Re: WalMart ,we shop there, not live . Dont attack all of us because of a few who do what they can to enjoy the remaining years of life left them.

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10. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:08:33 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

Harley says...

TreeHuggers sounds like a Tree Hugger ...! The problem TreeHuggers doesn't recognize is that they are public lands that have federal requirements and they are being ignored by the Forest Service who is mandated to follow and enforce. More of the same government ignoring the will of the people. Not to allow the people to be involved with decisions made about OUR PUBLIC lands is very scary. We are losing the basic principles that our wonderful country was establish under. What's new ... some call it change .. I call it a terrible risky trend ...!!

11. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 8:04:06 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

natasha9 says...

Thanks nb - I thought it was just us! We stayed up there last summer and the guy was terrible. We had my sister-in-law come visit us at our camp site for dinner, and when he saw the 3rd car, started to threaten us. Her friend tried to give him money for an extra spot to shut him up and he called the Bayfield Marshall! What a jerk! We actually packed up the next day and stayed at the Pine River Lodge. Very unpleasant.

12. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 6:35:52 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

TreeHugger says...

I think the prices to visit the public lands is too low, and I would vote for charging seniors more than just \$10. If they can afford their big gas-hog motor homes, they can afford to pay for their stay at the public lands. Most of them park at Wal-Mart because they're too cheap to pay to stay at an established RV park, and Wal-Mart allows it even though there are signs posted. I also think there should be fees to visit places like Yankee Boy Basin. People want to play, but they don't want to pay. Going to a theater to see just one movie costs much more than paying a few dollars to see the flowers at Yankee Boy, and the wilderness is a much better show.

13. Monday, April 19, 2010
at 3:47:44 AM

[Suggest removal](#)

nb says...

The person who runs the concession at Vallecito has this negative thing about everyone.

Comments for this article have been closed

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