

Plumas County (CA) News

Forest Service launches boat fees, raises campground rates

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The Plumas County Board of Supervisors voiced concerns at a meeting Tuesday, May 4, about the Plumas National Forest's plans to raise camping and boating fees in the Feather River Canyon, Bucks Lake and Antelope Lake areas.

Acting Assistant Resource Officer Lisa Sedlacek, from the Mt. Hough Ranger District, presented the changes to the board and tried to address the supervisors' concerns.

She explained many camping fees would rise from \$20 to \$23; lakefront sites would go from \$23 to \$25; and a \$7 boat launch fee would be added at Antelope Lake, where no fee existed previously.

Sedlacek told the board the boating fee would be charged from the beginning of April to the end of September and the Forest would offer a \$35 season pass.

Her background materials indicated the Sandy Point boat launch fee at Bucks Lake would rise from \$5 to \$7. (See sidebar for the new prices at affected campsites and boat launches.)

Sedlacek said the concessionaire who ran these areas for the last several years "decided not to continue," which forced the Forest to put out new bids before selecting Royal Elk Park Management.

Quincy Supervisor Lori Simpson asked when the fees last went up at the sites in question.

The resource officer told her she'd been working on the Lassen National Forest until very recently so she wasn't sure, but added that fees usually couldn't go up more often than every three years.

The supervisor followed up by wondering why the Antelope boat ramp suddenly needed a fee.

Sedlacek replied the concessionaire needed to maintain the site and had to be able to make a profit.

The Forest Service representative indicated the fees would cover “utilities, propane cost, vault and septic pumping, garbage collection, the transient occupancy tax, any kind of liability insurance.

“We require they do water testing and the county’s fees associated with that.

“Also we like to have good reliable communications so within the campgrounds the campground hosts have Internet service and some kind of telephone service.”

She said the Forest was also working to repair a cable that was “ripped in half due to the plowing of snow on the boat ramp.”

“There are also a couple patches of pavement that are deteriorating out there.”

Sedlacek said the Forest Service also “installed a information board and fee tube up there.”

Simpson asked, “When the federal government decides to raise fees like that is there a public input period?”

The resource officer told her there wasn’t one when a concessionaire was involved because “it’s a business opportunity and it’s usually through an operating plan and it’s approved by the forest supervisor.”

The supervisor asked representatives from Royal Elk where their corporate office was located.

They told her it was in Hollister in San Benito County but clarified there was a local office in Twain.

At that point, Portola Supervisor Terry Swofford said, “This really concerns me because most of this county is owned by the federal government.”

“So, with the lack of timber industry that we’ve lost here, we have to depend on tourism and stuff.”

He said when the Forest Service raised fees, “You’re driving more of the only industry we have left away and that really concerns me.”

Swofford also told Royal Elk he wasn’t blaming them for the fee increases.

Indian Valley Supervisor Robert Meacher provided some background information from his point of view.

“The board needs to know that we have a new concessionaire because of an unresolved issue between the previous concessionaire and our assessor’s possessory use tax that overlaid these concessions where they’d never been before.”

Meacher said the concessionaire lost interest when this dispute arose.

In a short phone interview, Meacher clarified that he wasn’t blaming the assessor’s office for this incident. He said the Board of Supervisors ordered the county to start collecting the possessory use tax.

“All we were doing was what every other county has been doing forever.”

The possessory use tax became an issue in Plumas County in 2008, when it held up the county’s negotiations on the most recent High Sierra Music Festival contract.

At that time the county had begun to receive pressure from the state to enforce that tax.

At the board meeting, Meacher said he understood the concessionaires needed to increase fees to make a profit at this point.

What he didn’t understand about the Sandy Point situation was, “If we’ve been collecting \$5 all these years, where has the money gone when all of the sudden we need repairs?”

“I understand the need for repairs, but that’s why we collect a fee, and if the fee was not high enough perhaps they need to be reviewed with the concessionaires annually so that we don’t end up like we are at Antelope Lake of putting in a \$7 fee where there was no fee since the dam was built in the ‘60s.”

Meacher was also incredulous about whether the concessionaire would “be able to police the new fee.”

“I think what’s going to happen is we’re going to spend more trying to institute this fee and enforce this fee than we will generate in revenue from collecting the fee.”

The supervisor said he feared the sheriff’s boat patrol would spend all its time enforcing the new rules.

Meacher was concerned because the area seemed to go through concessionaires fairly often and it would be tough, before turning to the Royal Elk representatives and saying, “I wish you well.”

Sedlacek said there were improvements being made at Antelope Lake with old toilets being replaced by new ones that are supposed to smell less.

She also said the forest was trying to get funding from the California Department of Boating and Waterways.

“Some of the ideas that may be approved if they are funded will be to resurface the lot up there, the parking lot; there’s going to be a nice new boat dock, potential shade verandas for the picnic sites, and then an accessible trail that leads to the picnic areas.”

She also said Royal Elk wanted to survey the public on what kinds of equipment, such as canoes and paddle boats, they would like to be able to rent.

Responding to the law enforcement concerns she said, “We’re not really relying on the sheriff to enforce boat passes; we’re relying on Royal Elk Park Management to do that work.”

Meacher mentioned that another difficult sell for fishing in the area was the fact that a lawsuit was stopping Fish and Game from stocking the lake.

Quincy Supervisor Lori Simpson commented, “I hope the Forest Service knows we want to keep camping still affordable.”

Swofford said he talked to fishermen from Reno, Nev., who told him “they’re not coming back here. If they have to pay seven bucks to launch their boat they’re going somewhere else. So that’s where my point comes from. We’re losing tourists, people we depend on.”

Sedlacek told them, “We’ll work hard out there to provide a quality recreation experience for them so we won’t lose those folks.”