

From: RICHARD ARTLEY [*Retired Forest Service NEPA Compliance Officer*]
To: [*Long list of current Forest Service official at the National, Regional, and Forest levels*]

Sent: Tuesday, January 12, 2010 4:06 PM

Subject: My how the USFS leaders (who are lapdogs for corporate America) must thrill at harming disabled and elderly Americans to assure maximum profit for campground concessionaires

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why today's forest service has lost ALL public trust and respect.

Forest Service plan cuts discounts for seniors, disabled

By Barbara Barte Osborn - Bee Correspondent

Published in the Modesto Bee, January 10, 2010

<http://www.modbee.com/breakingnews/story/1002007.html>

A proposed policy change by the U.S. Forest Service would reduce some long-standing benefits for senior citizens and permanently disabled people but at the same time expand benefits for holders of other national passes.

The changes to the agency's national pass discount policy could affect many of the facilities in the national forests closest to the Sacramento region.

The Forest Service has not publicly explained the reasons it is changing its policy on pass-related discounts, but is accepting comment on the proposal through Feb. 1.

The Bee's Cathy Locke contributed to this report.

Among the proposed changes:

- Eliminating a 50 percent discount on camping and free access to day-use areas for holders of passes for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Replacing the more generous discounts with a 10 percent discount at campgrounds and day-use areas operated by private concessionaires for holders of passes for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Extending free entry to day-use areas operated by concessionaires to holders of annual and volunteer passes.

The 50 percent senior and disabled discounts, established as a lifetime benefit by 1965 legislation, would remain intact at campgrounds operated by Forest Service employees. However, the agency now contracts with concessionaires to operate the majority of its developed facilities, including 82 percent of its thousands of reservable campsites nationwide.

Affected by the proposed changes would be a majority of the approximately 100 Forest Service campgrounds in the Tahoe National Forest and Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Concessionaires manage 62 of the 79 campgrounds in the Tahoe National Forest, said Ann Westling, the forest's public affairs officer.

In the Tahoe Management Unit, the Forest Service has six campgrounds with contract managers, said Rex Norman, basin unit spokesman.

In the Eldorado National Forest, concessionaires manage 27 campground facilities and the Forest Service manages 12, said Forest Service spokesman Frank Mosbacher. Under current contracts, he said, 50 percent discounts are available to holders of passes for seniors and the disabled at the concessionaire-run sites.

Allowing concessionaires to reduce the discount to 10 percent for senior and disabled campers "would be comparable to other market discounts and would be sustainable for concession operations, even with changing demographics," according to the Forest Service proposal.

Concessionaires seek the reduction in part because too many people are becoming eligible for the discount as the baby-boomer generation ages.

Also, they say, the 2005 Recreation Enhancement Act, while maintaining the lifetime passes, no longer requires the 50 percent discount at concessionaire-operated campgrounds. That has been continued only because Forest Service policy requires it in their contracts.

The proposal "is the latest in a long series of policy decisions that have transformed recreation on public lands from a public benefit into a market commodity," Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, a Colorado-based group that opposes fees on public lands, said in a statement.

"The Forest Service is not showing good faith by changing the terms of the passes after the fact," Benzar said.

Mike Painter, coordinator of Californians for Western Wilderness, said the proposal "highlights the issues created when traditional government services are privatized. Now citizens are being asked to pay to cover the concessionaires' profit (which includes their fees to the Forest Service). So it winds up costing the taxpayer more."

Fees for camping should be nominal, covering costs for such basics as restrooms and trash removal, Painter said, adding that day use should be free except for developed facilities such as boat ramps.

Elaine and Les Jackson, seniors and longtime campers from Atascadero, said they are puzzled and dismayed by the proposal.

"It says it's a lifetime permit, so how could they do that?" asked Elaine Jackson.

The proposed change, she said, is one more economic hit for those who can least afford it.

"My husband is handicapped and being able to camp is very important to him," she said.

"The 50 percent discount allows a lot of seniors and handicapped to get out and enjoy our country's natural beauty. Many of us would not be able to afford to camp anymore without it."

The Jacksons, who have a 1988 motor home, "dry-camp at the campgrounds that give us 50 percent off," she said.