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Gunnison Country Times

# Forest Service asks for feedback on paid camping

By [News Staff](#) on Thursday, January 7, 2021

Changes would go into effect spring 2022

The process to impose camping fees on U.S. Forest Service lands near Crested Butte is about to enter a public comment period with the agency asking for opinions on the change.

Following opportunities for public input throughout this year, the plan will then go before the Regional Office before going into effect in May 2022.

Western Colorado University Master in Environmental Management student Lizzy Bauer presented the U.S. Forest Service's latest proposal to Crested Butte Town Council members on Monday.

The proposal marks a major change. Currently, Forest Service lands in drainages around Crested Butte allow "dispersed" camping — or camping anywhere in the national forest outside of a designated campground. Under the envisioned plan, however, camping only would be allowed at designated, paid sites.

The management proposal encompasses all the major corridors in the Crested Butte area — including the Gothic area, the Slate River Valley Washington Gulch, Kebler Pass, Brush Creek and Cement Creek National forest lands in each drainage are slated for the development of designated camping.

Bauer said the plan identifies two top priorities in terms of addressing impacts from increased visitation: litter and human waste. That means adding more toilets and trash collection to mitigate the damage.

The overarching proposed fees include \$5 for a day pass, \$20 for an annual day pass and \$10-15 for overnight camping. But those figures range depending on location.

Under the proposed plan, the Slate River Valley, Washington Gulch, Brush Creek and Cement Creek would be subject to fees of \$10 to 15 per night depending on the amenities.

Lake Irwin and Kebler Pass winter trailhead use would include day-use fees at \$5 per vehicle or \$20 for an annual pass. Fees are not applicable to walk-ins and bike-ins.

Bauer said the fee implementation is "desperately" needed to manage public lands, especially in the Gunnison Valley where visitation continues to increase.

According to Bauer, tourism has more than doubled in Gunnison County since 2013. This past year, public lands managers estimated the valley saw an approximate 300% increase in use on public lands.

"The Gunnison National Forest is seeing these drastic increases in use, however funding is lacking; Bauer said.

U.S. Forest Service's Aaron Drendel told council that he estimates the proposed fee structure could bring in an estimated \$100-150,000 annually.

But Drendel also said it's important to note the work transitioning out dispersed camping is already underway while fees are being considered.

This past spring, the Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Committee (STOR) partnered with the Gunnison Ranger District, Gunnison County, Crested Butte Conservation Corps, the Gunnison County Stewardship Fund and others to act on the STOR committee's recommendation and began implementing designated camping in the Slate River and Washington Gulch drainages.

The new fees would allow for amenities like pit toilets, fire rings, parking spaces, trash and recycling receptacles and forest protection officers available to respond to safety and security issues.

Bauer said the hope is to implement fees under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) alongside the Forest Service. The other alternative is utilizing concessionaires to manage the new designated campsites.

Under FLREA, the campsites would be registered on the federal website for reservations, recreation.gov, which increases the cost but is worth the ease, said Bauer.

The site would add an additional \$6 administration fee for overnight camping. So, if a visitor spends three nights (the average stay according to Bauer) at \$10 per night, the overall cost would be \$36.

Bauer said the nominal fee is well worth it to maintain amenities and infrastructure in coming years.

Crested Butte Mayor Jim Schmidt questioned who had the final say on what organization managed the campsites, concessionaires or the Forest Service.

That decision is ultimately made by their Regional Forest Service Office after input from necessary stakeholders, Bauer said.

While she said it's the hope that the Forest Service would manage the sites, it's entirely possible they could punt responsibility to other parties.

"I guess you have more faith in the Forest Service sticking with public opinion, especially when it comes to concessionaires," Schmidt said.

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