

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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LOS PADRES FOREST CAMPGROUNDS NOW UNDER PRIVATE CONCESSIONAIRE MANAGEMENT

DEC. 2016

Since November 01, about fifty Los Padres National Forest day-use areas & campgrounds have been signed over to private concessionaire management by the Parks Management Company. The fees have gone from \$5 per night at former Adventure Pass campgrounds to \$20 or \$30 per night, and there is no annual campground use fee.

Campground use in the Ojai Ranger District that was formerly affordable with an annual Adventure Pass costing \$30, will now cost \$7,300 per annum – a price hike by a factor of 243 for the \$20 per night sites, if you were to be spending every night of the year staying in those local campgrounds. So the low-income campers that used to have an affordable place to stay at forest campgrounds are out of luck.

This move occurred with no public notice and no public comment period. Though recreation staff at Los Padres Forest HQ in Goleta told us that they sent word out to the Forest's five Ranger District offices to provide them with lists of interested parties to inform them of the proposed concessionaire agreement, no forest public interest organization received any word of the plan. While a lawsuit would be justified because of this willful omission of basic Forest Service planning protocol, the concessionaire agreement is now already signed and the facts on the ground mean that this would possibly be a pointless exercise.

This move has been in the planning for many years, as Los Padres Forest managers had to prepare by choreographing the previous campground concessionaire contracts – including Wheeler Gorge Campground and campgrounds & day-use sites beyond the kiosk along Paradise Road north of Santa Barbara – to come to an end at the same point in time, so the forest-wide package could be newly concessioned out at the same time to one operator.

There were only two companies bidding on the package – Parks Management Company from Templeton, who previously operated camping along the Big Sur coast, and camping and lake facility use at Piru and Pyramid Lakes and Lake Isabella, and

Rocky Mountain Recreation Company, based in Valencia, who still manage the facilities at Cachuma and Castaic Lakes as well as at forest campgrounds in Colorado.

THE BIG PICTURE – A NATIONWIDE PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC ASSETS

We are not alone in seeing our public forest campgrounds handed over to private profit-making enterprises. Thirty years ago, the U.S. Forest Service operated all its own campgrounds. By 2009 about 50% of forest campgrounds had been handed over to concessionaire operators; now the nationwide figure is closer to 80%.

The given reason is usually diminishing recreation budgets. Though there is scant evidence of drastic reductions from a look at annual recreation dollars appropriated by Congress to the U.S. Forest Service, the agency has an unfortunate method of siphoning off these funds all the way down the bureaucratic chain from D.C. to the actual sites on the ground at the Ranger District level.

First the funds pass through the Forest Service's nationwide HQ in D.C., where administrators take a big chunk of the funds, mainly because they can; then the same happens at one of the Forest Service Regional Headquarters, then the same again at each National Forest's HQ, by which time about half of the original amount is left to hit the actual physical American soil for which the Congressionally appropriated recreation dollars were intended.

But one cannot argue the details of Forest Service recreation (or any other) funding, as their money trail is purposefully kept opaque.

By contrast, the BLM has very transparent financial distribution of its Congressionally appropriated recreation spending. The BLM still manages all its own campgrounds. It uses no concessionaire operators, but it makes regular use of volunteer – note, volunteer – campground hosts.

If the BLM can keep its campgrounds in the black by these means, the U.S. Forest Service should be able to do the same.

The point is that it's a policy decision by the U.S. Forest Service to hand over their campgrounds to private enterprise. Looking at it another way, if Parks Management Company can plan how to make a profit from Los Padres Forest campgrounds, how is it that the Forest Service cannot manage all their campgrounds themselves, when they have no need to make any profit from doing so? Under the current forest recreation fee authority, the FLREA, the Forest Service is allowed to retain all of the day-use and campground fees that they collect.

But National Forest Supervisors generally have their eyes more closely attuned to their career advancement prospects, than to the well-being of the camping public in a forest where their posting is only for a few years. In over thirty years of activism for the public benefit on Los Padres National Forest, we have yet to see anything more than lip-service from a series of Forest Supervisors to the concerns and suggestions we have brought before them. This is in stark contrast to the excellent relationship KSWC has always had with staff & administrators at the Ojai Ranger District office.

However, this concessionaire policy is not going to change without action from Congress. Unfortunately, both political parties in D.C. have supported this Forest Service privatization agenda.

BETTER PRICES FOR THOSE OVER 62

The best deal out there is available for forest visitors that are over 62 years of age. For a one-time cost of only \$10, they may buy a lifetime Interagency Senior Pass at Forest Service, BLM or Park Service offices. This pass provides a 50% discount at Los Padres Forest concessionaire campgrounds, so the camping fee will be \$10 per night rather than \$20, or \$15 rather than \$30.

This lifetime pass is valid at National Parks, BLM sites – and at those Forest Service sites where the concessionaire is required to honor them (such as at Los Padres Forest campgrounds).

On a similar note, the Access Pass is available to any family where there is one family member with a permanent disability. This lifetime pass also allows a 50% discount on campgrounds, and is valid for the whole family of the disabled individual.

LOCAL CAMPGROUNDS

The concessionaire agreement covers the Wheeler Gorge Campground and the adjacent Holiday Group Camp; in Rose Valley, the Rose Valley Falls and

Middle Lion Campgrounds, and up the road from the summit of Hwy. 33, the Pine Mtn. and Reyes Peak Campgrounds, where the fee is \$20 per night, and \$10 per extra vehicle.

We understand that the concessionaire will be installing metal pillars, or “fee tubes” at these sites, where you may deposit your campground fee in an envelope provided.

It will not be wise to refuse to pay a fee. Tickets given out by the concessionaire will be reported to the County Sheriff's Dept.

Because annual Adventure Passes were sold up to the fall of 2016, the concessionaire will honor those as campground/day-use payment, until the end of the 12 months for which each pass is valid.

At campsites beyond the pay kiosk on Paradise Road north of Santa Barbara, the fee will be \$30 per night (or \$15 with a Senior Interagency Pass) plus \$10 per extra vehicle.

CONCESSIONAIRE SITES & THE FLREA FEE LAW

The public interest lawsuit filed against the Adventure Pass program a few years ago in Southern California was settled earlier this year, after the U.S. Forest Service agreed to levy Adventure Pass fees only at day-use areas & campgrounds with six specific amenities present.

This meant that the agency had to stop charging fees for access to undeveloped lands in the four Southern California National Forests, which they had been doing for over ten years, even though the FLREA fee law expressly prohibited this.

In instances where forest access trailheads are adjacent to day-use sites & campgrounds where Adventure Pass fees are charged, the Forest Service must now sign the entry point to the day-use area or campground fee site, and they must allow vehicles parked before their fee sign to park for free, so that hikers may access the undeveloped lands without a parking fee or a parking ticket.

In Rose Valley north of Ojai, both Rose Valley Falls and Middle Lion Campgrounds have trailheads that begin there. Hikers may now park at the side of the road before the signed entry to either campground, without being charged a parking fee. The new Forest Service sign is a small shield-shaped sign about 12” across, saying “U.S. Fee Area.” The concessionaire will honor this free trailhead parking before entering the campgrounds.

PIEDRA BLANCA TRAILHEAD

The Ojai Ranger District has maintained control of the Piedra Blanca trailhead at the end of Rose Valley Road, as the only remaining Adventure Pass fee site in the entire Ojai Ranger District.

This is quite a change from the start of the Adventure Pass program in 1996, when pretty much the entire Ojai Ranger District's forest access required a pass. You might ask, and with good reason, why a forest access trailhead that is not a campground, and has minimal function as a day-use site, should remain an Adventure Pass fee site?

The answer is that the Forest Service, while agreeing to free trailhead parking at many dozens of campgrounds across the four Southern California National Forests, insisted on keeping the Piedra Blanca trailhead as a fee site. But as in the examples above, hikers who do not wish to pay for trailhead parking there may simply park before the "U.S. Fee Area" sign at the entrance to the current trailhead parking lot. This means at the side of the downhill road that leads to the trailhead parking lot.

Vehicles parked in the actual trailhead parking lot without evidence of an Adventure Pass in their vehicle will be subject to a Forest Service "Notice of Required Fee", as have been issued there for some years now. This notice requires the vehicle's driver/owner to mail in \$5 for a one-day Adventure Pass to a Forest Service office in San Bernardino.

MORE DETAILS ON OUR CAMPGROUNDS

The current new concessionaire agreement will be up for renewal in five years. These renewals are never subject to any public or community input.

The concessionaire must pay the Forest Service 10% of their proceeds annually, which is estimated to be \$2,883,000 per annum across Los Padres Forest. This \$288,300 as Los Padres' forest-wide 10% percent is, in other parts of the nation, often paid in labor & materials that improve the facilities at the day-use sites and campgrounds.

This seems equitable – except that those site improvements often lead the Forest Service to agree to campground fee increases, whenever the 5-year concessionaire agreement is up for renewal. Consider yourselves warned!

Had there been proper public input into this new concessionaire deal before it was signed, we'd have brought up the matter of the PSHB tree-killing beetle, which has already infested LA County.

The PSHB lives on over 40 species of trees, including native riparian species such as – well, all of the major species – oaks, willows, alders, sycamores and cottonwoods. There is no known spray to stop the invasive exotic PSHB.

The only preventive option is to ban the movement of firewood from infested areas into the riparian areas of Los Padres Forest – which is where most of our local campgrounds are situated.

There is no mention of this issue in the new concessionaire agreement, a very serious omission. It is not as if the Forest Service is unaware of the PSHB beetle. They have one staff person dedicated solely to dealing with the PSHB threat.

PARKS MANAGEMENT COMPANY

The Parks Management Company did not respond to several questions before our printing deadline (a period of four days). We asked whether they might offer an annual campground pass in the future, and whether their advertised annual day-use pass is valid at all the day-use sites they now manage across Los Padres Forest. We also wished to find out which campgrounds may be booked ahead of time by phone or by email.



A break from tamarisk pulling in the Sespe Gorge, June 2016.

PLEASE SUPPORT KSWC WITH A DONATION!

Your donations are our only source of funding. We appreciate your financial support of our efforts. Donations are not tax-deductible. Thanks to all our donors in 2016!

FIRE CLOSURE & RESTRICTIONS LIFTED

Forest campfire restrictions are lifted for the winter, and the area of last summer's Pine Fire is now open again to hikers and horseback riders.

Keep the Sespe Wild
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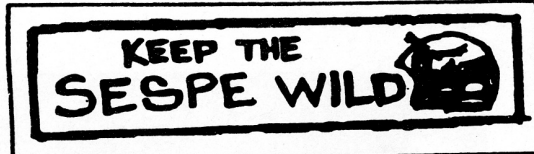
Our original T-shirts are light blue with the Keep the Sespe Wild logo in five colors.

Our newer T-shirts are white with the same five color logo on the back, and with an additional, pocket-sized logo in blue on the left front.

Please state white or blue with your order. Sizes are S, M, L, XL and XXL.

All 100% cotton.

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All prices include tax and shipping. Please include address and a phone number. Allow 2 to 3 weeks for delivery.

Send your order and check, made out to KSWC to: Keep Sespe Wild, PO Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

NO NEWS YET ON LOS PADRES FOREST HEADQUARTERS MOVE IN APRIL

Surprisingly, Los Padres Forest administrators have no word yet on where the Forest HQ will be moving in April 2017, when their lease on the current Goleta HQ building is up.

The move is expected to be to the Santa Ynez or Buellton area. This is far from the urban core where volunteers & college students live, who work with the Forest HQ staff and will face lengthy commutes to do so. It is also far from popular forest trails and campgrounds.

An urban interface for the local public and for tourists is an important factor that is clearly not seen as vital by the Forest Service.

CONSOLIDATION OF LOS PADRES RANGER DISTRICTS UNDERWAY

Los Padres Forest is also planning to close two of its current five Ranger District offices sometime in the coming year. Public input will be taken, but the decision is already made.

The new districts will be Big Sur, Front Country & Back Country. With the recent retirement of Ojai District Ranger Sue Exline, the Ojai and Santa Barbara Ranger Districts are already being jointly run by Santa Barbara District Ranger Pancho Smith. One of these two offices will be closed next year.

Either the Santa Lucia or the Mount Pinos Ranger District office will also close, as these two distant districts are consolidated; staff will drive a lot more.