

## Communication Guide

### Bighorn National Forest updated Occupancy and Use Regulations May 22, 2023

On May 22, 2023, Forest Supervisor, Andrew Johnson signed a new occupancy and use special order regulating camping and other recreational activities in the Bighorn National Forest. This order will be in effect through December 31, 2023, unless rescinded earlier. The order combined the original dispersed camping order, the developed recreation order, and the Porcupine Falls Trail order. Below is information on why the new regulations were developed, who was involved, and how it was accomplished.

Quick links to help the public:

- [Bear Resistant Products - Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee \(igbconline.org\)](https://www.igbconline.org)
- <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Wildlife-in-Wyoming/More-Wildlife/Large-Carnivore/Grizzly-Bear-Management/Bear-Wise-Wyoming-New/Camping-and-Hiking-in-Bear-Country>
- <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Wildlife-in-Wyoming/More-Wildlife/Large-Carnivore/Grizzly-Bear-Management/Bear-Wise-Wyoming/Living-in-Bear-Country>
- <https://www.fs.usda.gov/bighorn>

#### **Response to Query (AKA the Elevator Speech):**

Motorized dispersed camping is a very popular activity in the Bighorn National Forest. For several years a variety of concerns have arisen related to motorized dispersed camping, from both the Forest and surrounding communities' perspectives. Issues range from lack of available campsites, large numbers of campers and sites left unattended for long periods of time, lack of compliance with the 14-day stay limit order, to increasing resource damage on roads, water quality, meadows, and riparian areas, and increasing wildlife/human conflicts.

#### **Key Messages:**

- **The updated special order was developed to improve dispersed camping opportunities for all visitors while reducing negative impacts to natural and social resources.**
  - The long-term parking of private property on Bighorn National Forest lands has diminished the opportunity for all visitors to enjoy their public lands.
  - From public comments and decades of use, it is known that changes are needed in dispersed camping management.
  - Leaving personal property can make it susceptible to damage, theft, along with creating impacts to natural resources and other visitors.

- **The Forest Service is mandated to manage multiple resources along with dispersed camping, which is one of many aspects of recreation management.**
  - The Multi-Use Sustain Yield Act requires the Forest Service to manage all resources equally (timber, wildlife, range, water, and outdoor recreation), the effects of dispersed camping have long been impacting other resources.
  - Resource impacts from long-term dispersed camping are documented locally as well as nation-wide (impacts to soil, vegetation, and water quality).
  - The current regulations treat all campers equally with a year-round stay limit and is intended to open locations by requiring all visitors to move their personal property five road miles.
  
- **In 2019, Bighorn National Forest personnel partnered with the Big Horn Mountain Coalition Dispersed Camping Task Force to build on the Coalition’s public scoping efforts from 2016.**
  - Task Force recommendations were presented to the public online, in news releases, and during a series of six public meetings in 2022.
  - The public was given an opportunity to provide feedback on the recommendations.
  - The Forest Service developed the new regulations based on feedback from the public and the Task Force.
  
- **Dispersed camping management is a long-term project for managers; they are looking at how decisions may impact use not only now but in the future.**
  - The goal is to develop an easy-to-understand program that is also easily enforced.
  - The current order will be in effect for one year and compliance data from the 2023 camping season will determine our next steps forward, which may include changing the moving requirement from five road miles to removing all personal equipment from the Forest before returning to the same location.
  - Additional changes to dispersed camping management will be released as officials complete reviews and determine funding sources to implement (these changes may include opening more locations to dispersed camping such as Jaws Trailhead and other areas that may be currently closed to camping).
  
- **Habituated wildlife can be more than just a nuisance and become a safety issue for people.**
  - No matter what species of animal, when wildlife learn to associate people with food it can lead to the untimely death of wildlife, property damage, disease spread, or injury to humans.
  - Human and bear conflicts have been reported forest wide.
  - Since 2018, nine bears have been euthanized due to human conflict on the Forest. In addition, there have been more than two dozen other reports of conflicts that resulted in wildlife managers trapping and relocating and attempting to trap (unsuccessfully) bears in the Bighorn National Forest.

- **Educational efforts alone over the last several years have been unsuccessful in eliminating, or reducing, encounters between bears and humans in the Bighorn National Forest.**
  - According to the WGFD, the average number of reported black bear/human conflicts in the Bighorn National Forest have more than doubled in the last five years compared to the previous 15 years.
  - Educational efforts over the last several years by both Bighorn National Forest and Wyoming Game and Fish Department managers have included messaging through the newspaper, social media, and radio; door hangers for campers; Living in Bear and Lion Country workshops; brochures at travel and visitor center, and local offices; training of personnel and camp hosts; as well as efforts to provide infrastructure for forest visitors to properly secure attractants through placement of bear resistant dumpsters and food storage boxes across the forest.
  - The attractant regulation will provide consistency with neighboring Forests with the same user groups and with other Forests in Wyoming and the Region that have bear populations.

## Questions and Answers:

### 1. What is meant by the moving requirement of five road miles?

The intent of the regulation is to create opportunities by requiring people to share quality camping locations by moving and allowing other people a chance to camp. The requirement is to move five miles away from where you had been camping. It means after 14 days, your next camp must be located five road miles in one direction away from your previous camp.

### 2. What a wildlife attractant?

Attractants can be, but are not limited to, game carcasses, trash, pet food, used plates or dishes with food residue, human food, bird feeders, and any perfumed products such as lotions or deodorants. For the purpose of this order, plain hay or hay cubes without additives are **not** considered attractants.

### 3. How do I properly store wildlife attractants?

Hang items where they are 10-15' from ground and 4' from side supports. It is not legal to cut green trees to build meat poles or other structures to hang items. Attractants should be stored in a certified manner listed in the most current Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee Certified Bear-Resistant Products list. [Bear Resistant Products - Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee \(igbconline.org\)](#)

Items may also be stored in a closed vehicle, trailer, building, or facility constructed of solid, non-pliable material that, when secured, has no openings, hinges, lids, or coverings that would allow a bear to gain entry by breaking, bending, tearing, biting, or pulling with its claws (any windows must be closed). Horse or livestock trailers may not have any openings greater than 10 inches in two dimensions and must have any food, refuse, or animal carcasses stored more than three feet from any opening. Regular coolers are not considered bear-proof and should not be left outside unattended.

The following links provide more information:

Camping and hiking in bear country- <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Wildlife-in-Wyoming/More-Wildlife/Large-Carnivore/Grizzly-Bear-Management/Bear-Wise-Wyoming-New/Camping-and-Hiking-in-Bear-Country>

Living in bear country- <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Wildlife-in-Wyoming/More-Wildlife/Large-Carnivore/Grizzly-Bear-Management/Bear-Wise-Wyoming/Living-in-Bear-Country>

**4. What if my cooler or drink dispenser just has water or ice in it?**

If a cooler does not meet the requirements of proper attractant storage, you may be cited. The intent is to respect wildlife and it is best to err on the side of caution and store your property appropriately.

**5. Why do we need to change the camping requirements to year-round?**

The Bighorn National Forest was the last Forest in the system not to have a year-round stay limit, as far as research found. Visitors to the Forest also visit other locations in the region, so to reduce confusion and to provide a more consistent expectation, the year-round stay limit was adopted. This also removes any perception of favoring one group over another, all campers at any time of the year have the same regulations.

**6. What is the Bighorn National Forest enforcement plan?**

The Forest has been enforcing camping regulations since they were first signed in the late 1980s. In 2023, enforcement will be more aggressive. Along with the existing two law enforcement officers, each ranger district on the Forest has hired additional permanent staff (six Forest Protection Officers, FPO) to assist with enforcement of all our regulations. It is a priority for the Forest Supervisor to enforce the camping rules specifically. A more consistent approach to camper tracking across all districts will be implemented in 2023. FPOs will also be using technology in the form of mobile hand-held devices with an application designed to track campers for a more forest-wide connected approach. The 14-day stay limit will be strictly enforced (**the fine is \$100 with a \$30 processing fee and an additional \$20 per day over the stay limit**).

**7. Why aren't there more storage locations on the mountain?**

Unfortunately, allowing people to store their personal property for long periods of time is not something the Forest Service has the authority to allow. The current known location on the Medicine Wheel Ranger District is not in compliance with our regulations and will no longer be tolerated for private property storage. However, Forest Service personnel will be looking for suitable and appropriate locations across the Forest for potential locations that could be operated under special use permit if an entity was interested in applying for this as a commercial use.

**8. Isn't it cheaper to just pay the fine rather than move my camper and pay for off-Forest storage?**

The fine for overstaying is \$100 with a \$30 processing fee and an additional \$20 per day over the stay limit. If an individual is determined to be a repeat offender, Forest Service

officers have the discretion to issue a mandatory appearance before a Federal Magistrate in Federal Court. The Forest will request higher penalties for repeat offenders.

**9. Why doesn't the Forest Service run the vehicle license and registration plates and enforce their regulations?**

Only FS Law Enforcement have the authority to run registration plates. Many camper owners fail to register property in accordance with state laws. However, many plates are still run and cited for failure to comply with Closure Orders.

**10. Why is it an issue to leave my equipment unattended on the mountain?**

Issues with leaving your property unattended include the increased risk of theft or possible damage from other people, wildlife, or natural disasters such as fires, snow or wind events. There are also natural resource issues such as reduction in vegetation, soil compaction, and erosion from long-term camping. Leaving your equipment has a large impact on the ability of other Americans to find a quality campsite that does not have an empty camp trailer or other equipment in the site.

**11. Is there really a problem with people finding an open camp spot?**

Decades of complaints, observations, and early notes indicate that it is difficult to locate a campsite due to a large number of trailers left in the Forest each year. When camping equipment is left, it reduces the opportunity for others to use a site even if the owners are not present. It also negatively impacts scenic values and can lead to vegetation and other resource damage.

**12. How many people can I gather in one place to camp before I need an authorization?**

A non-commercial group use permit is needed for groups of 75 or more people.

**13. What other changes can I expect in the near future?**

The current regulations will expire at the end of 2023. Forest personnel will review enforcement data compiled in 2023 and advise the Forest Supervisor on the next regulations. If there is no improvement in compliance with the stay limit, there is a chance the moving requirement could change to moving all equipment off-Forest for some time prior to returning to the Forest to camp.

Forest personnel will also continue to analyze the implementation of more of the Dispersed Camping Task Force recommendations including a sticker program to authorize dispersed camping, identifying and assigning designated dispersed camping sites where it makes sense, and expanding Jaws Trailhead to allow overnight camping, including livestock.

**14. What was the Dispersed Camping Task Force and what were their recommendations?**

The Big Horn Mountain Country Coalition (BHMCC), solicited citizens in each of the four counties to participate in a collaborative task force. The goal of the task force was to review the findings of the BHMCC public surveys completed in 2016, hear the concerns of the Forest, and

work on building possible solutions. The task force met monthly in public meetings for about a year and presented a list of recommendations to Bighorn National Forest officials.

These dispersed camping management recommendations from the Task Force are currently being considered by managers:

- Update the special order (updated and signed May 22, 2023),
  - Change to a year-round 14-day stay limit,
  - Change moving requirement,
  - Consider ½ mile dispersed camping buffer on Hwy 16 (like along Hwy 14 and 14A)- this was considered, but not implemented,
  - Permit system to allow staying over 14-days in special circumstances- this was considered but not implemented,
  - food attractant storage requirement.
- Implement a sticker program to authorize dispersed camping.
- Identify and assign designated dispersed camping sites.
- Expand Jaws Trailhead to allow overnight camping, including livestock.

It was identified that these items needed further discussion before being proposed as an action item:

- Identify and designate camper storage areas and associated permit system.
- Open new areas to dispersed camping (e.g. move gates back on closed roads).
- Limit camping around recreation residences and cabin owner considerations.
- Implement a zoned area with associated dates.
- Possible update to special order,
  - occupancy requirement for designated dispersed sites.

### **15. What does 14 days out of 28 days mean?**

A campsite cannot be used longer than 14 days before all camp equipment and personal property must be moved 5 road miles. The intent of the 28-day period is to prevent people from shuffling their camp around in a smaller area and not meeting the moving requirement of 5 road miles. For example, a series of shorter stays of less than 14 days in an area where the occupant has moved less than 5 road miles cannot exceed an accumulative 28 days in that area before the occupant must move five road miles.

### **News Release:**

Sheridan, WY May 22, 2023 — Bighorn National Forest Supervisor, Andrew Johnson, recently signed an updated occupancy and use special order that, among other uses, affects dispersed camping. Changes to note are the 14-day stay limit is now year-round, visitors are required to move any personal property five road miles before returning to a campsite, and a new wildlife attractant storage requirement. Changes to the camping regulations are being phased starting this year. These new regulations expire in December 2023 and will be re-evaluated at that time. If there continues to be an unacceptable number of violations in 2023, further changes can be expected in 2024 including the requirement to remove all personal property from the Forest.

“Past environmental analysis and public input show that dispersed camping has been an issue on the Forest for decades,” said Andrew Johnson, Bighorn National Forest Supervisor. “Along with

resource damage, the behavior of leaving equipment on the mountain has reduced the opportunity for people to enjoy public lands. There is a finite number of quality camping locations, and we all need to work on sharing them appropriately.”

Due to increasing conflicts between wildlife, such as bears, and humans over the last several years, a wildlife attractant storage requirement was included in the new regulations. The wildlife attractant portion of the order includes requiring wildlife attractants to be stored in a closed vehicle, trailer, building, or facility constructed of solid, non-pliable material that, when secured, has no openings, hinges, lids, or coverings that would allow a bear to gain entry by breaking, bending, tearing, biting, or pulling with its claws (any windows must be closed). Horse or livestock trailers may not have any openings greater than 10 inches in two dimensions and must have any food, refuse, or animal carcasses stored more than three feet from any opening. Regular coolers are not considered bear-proof and should not be left outside unattended.

The high and long-term use of dispersed camping sites in the Bighorn National Forest has been impacting other resources and regulation changes were necessary. Most of the changes to the regulations were developed from input provided by the public online and during six public meetings held during the late summer in 2022.

Bighorn National Forest officials continue to evaluate the remaining Big Horn Mountain Coalition’s Dispersed Camping Task Force recommendations. These recommendations include a sticker program to authorize dispersed camping, identifying designated dispersed camping sites, and the expansion of Jaws Trailhead to allow overnight camping, including livestock. Other ideas such as identifying locations that may have dispersed camping potential but are currently closed to motorized access are also being considered.

You can find the new regulations along with all Forest orders on our website, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/bighorn/alerts-notice/?cid=stelprdb5151832>. If you have questions, please contact the Supervisor’s Office and Tongue Ranger District 307-674-2600 or your local Bighorn National Forest office. Follow us on Twitter (@BighornNF) or like us on Facebook (US Forest Service – Bighorn National Forest).