

Recreation Site Analysis

Executive Summary

Bighorn National Forest – September 26, 2016

The Bighorn National Forest is one of 11 national forest units in the Rocky Mountain Region (Region) of the U.S. Forest Service. The Region manages an extensive outdoor recreation program under the overall guidance of the Forest Service mission, the *National Framework for Sustainable Recreation* (2010), and the *Leadership Intent for Outdoor Recreation for the Rocky Mountain Region* (2015), as well as laws and agency policies.

In addition to congressional appropriations, national forests in the Region use a variety of state funds, grants, collections from other governmental bodies, other federal agency funds, various partner groups and agencies, concessionaires, volunteers, outfitters and guides, and others. These supplemental funding and labor resources are used to extend the Region's capability to provide for quality, safe, and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities on the national forests.

The benefits to American society that outdoor recreation provides are needed more today than ever before while at the same time there are unprecedented challenges to providing quality recreation in the long term. Major drivers affecting the Bighorn National Forest's recreation program include new recreation technologies, changed or increasing use levels, changing climatic conditions, static or decreasing financial capacity, and increasing wildfire fighting costs; all affect the future of the Bighorn's – and Region's - recreation program.

Additionally, the Bighorn National Forest's recreation program is diverse and the factors described above must be considered across the spectrum of program areas. While developed recreation sites are often high profile and offer popular types of activities, they represent but one component of the recreation program that accounts for a high proportion of the Forest's recreation program costs. We also manage wilderness, administer outfitter/guide and ski area permits, visitor and customer services, heritage sites, trails, and motor vehicle travel programs, among others. Each of these components relies on the same limited agency resources and funding for proper delivery and management. While we remain dedicated to providing the best array and quality of recreation services possible, this must be tempered by the reality of available resources and the diverse experiences the public expects from the Bighorn.

In consideration of the whole of our recreation program areas, the following Recreation Site Analysis (RSA) for the Bighorn is presented here for public review and feedback.

Project background

The Bighorn National Forest manages 71 developed recreation sites that range from trailheads and picnic areas to full-service visitor facilities with intensive developments such as drinking water, flush toilets, electrical, and sewage treatment facilities. Minimally developed sites are not included. The RSA process is a holistic review of the Bighorn's developed recreation program and builds on the similar recreation facility analysis (RFA) completed in 2008. In 2008 the Bighorn recorded a deferred maintenance backlog of \$3.3 million. Eight years later the deferred maintenance backlog has been reduced by 75 percent to \$820,000. Challenges remain. The RSA process is intended to bring our developed site portfolio more closely in line with projected staffing and funding levels, public demand, and the expressed interests of constituents in the long term.



Recommendations from this process can range from outright removal of sites (i.e. decommissioning), to reconstruction of existing sites, a change in operator, a reduced service schedule or a wide range of options in between. However, it is imperative that our program be sustainable – socially, environmentally, and economically – going into the future. This is the guiding principle of the RSA process.

The projected decreases in Forest Service funding for recreation and the costs of operation and maintenance are driving changes to the developed recreation program. We must forgo some services, reduce seasons of operation and study fee increases to maintain the high priority recreation opportunities the public desires.

A broad public understanding of the tradeoffs and opportunities inherent in managing developed recreation on the Bighorn is important to our success. Although we may have to give up some things, the Forest, guided by the RSA and the program of work, will be in a better position to sustain its developed recreation program into the future.

RSA Guiding Principle:

“Sustainability is the lens through which we make decisions. We will not invest in what we cannot sustain.”

Key points regarding the Bighorn RSA

Major changes were undertaken as a result of the 2008 RFA. Four campgrounds and two picnic grounds were closed and decommissioned. One campground was converted to a picnic area and one was converted to a parking area. Additionally, the Burgess Junction Visitor Center has not opened since September 2012. Smaller adjustments are proposed in the RSA.

We are working with both short- and long-term strategies to manage staff costs. Seasonal hiring in the recreation program has been reduced; additional short-term reductions are projected. Two permanent positions vacated between 2012 and 2015 were not filled. Further reductions in permanent staff, through attrition and reorganization, are anticipated.

When projected downward trends in budget and staffing are considered, it is obvious that tradeoffs and tough decisions will again need to be made. The unit cost per visitor for operation and maintenance of developed recreation sites is higher than for other recreation visitors. We may not be able to maintain all the Forest’s current sites to standards, which could affect the public’s expectation of high-quality, attractive recreation facilities.

If budgets rebound after the developed site program is adjusted, we will be in a position to use funding to improve annual maintenance and catch up on work backlogs in deferred site maintenance, or work on other recreation program components.

This program of work is focused on preserving quality recreation opportunities provided by the Bighorn National Forest, but not necessarily retaining all services and facilities at the same levels as previously offered.

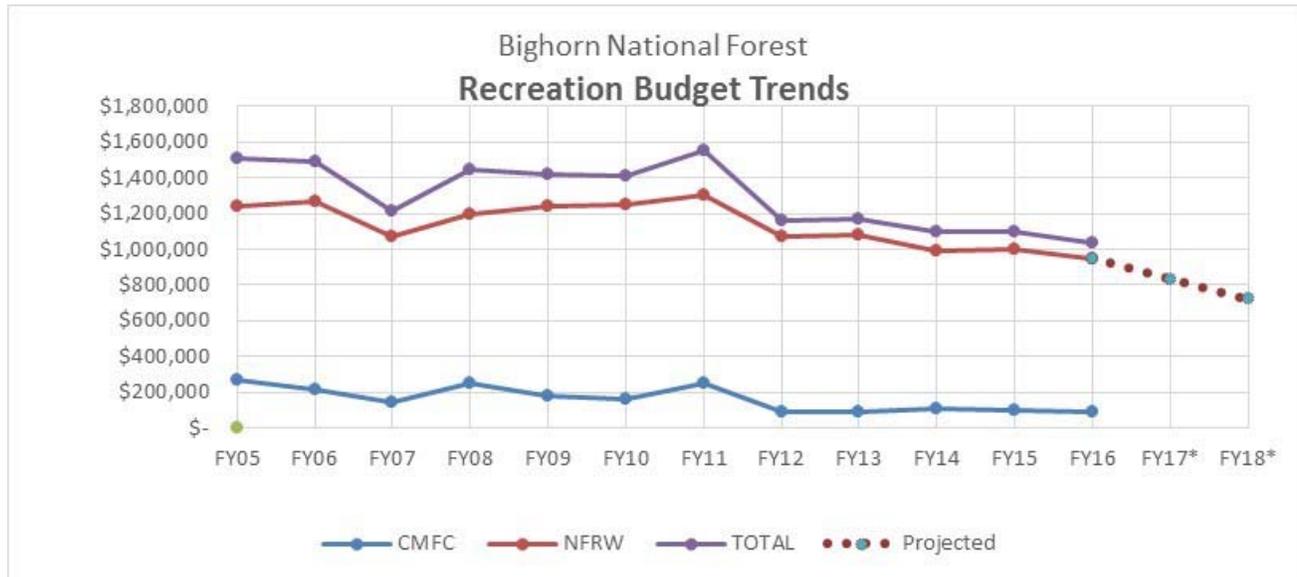
Evaluation of resources and costs

The Forest applied data, analysis, and logic to evaluate its work capacity and site management obligations. The agency’s developed recreation site database (INFRA) provides detailed cost information and site data that are used to inform management options and set realistic program goals across the Forest for the next five to 10 years.

Table 1 shows budget trends in the two appropriations the Forest receives annually to manage its recreation programs. NFRW funds developed and other recreation operations, while CMFC funds annual and deferred

maintenance of recreation facilities. Appropriated funds declined 31 percent overall between 2005 and 2016. A steeper decline is projected in the future.

Figure 1. Budget trends in the two budget appropriations used to manage the Bighorn’s recreation programs.



*The FY17 and FY18 NFRW budget amounts are projected based on national trends and the Rocky Mountain Region allocation model.

Significant changes are needed to reduce costs and restructure work to reach a sustainable recreation program over the long term. The analysis of developed recreation sites and preparation of the five-year program of work are a critical step in that process.

The Plan of Work (POW) – if fully implemented – would show a decrease of 9 percent in operations costs. The reduction is based on reducing both the season of operation and staff available for cleaning and checking compliance with regulations. The deferred maintenance backlog would be reduced by 13 percent as a result of implementing the proposed plan. This reduction is a result of both planned capital investments and smaller maintenance efforts. Repairs or reconstruction at Shell Falls Trail, Doyle Creek Campground, and Burgess Junction Visitor Center are included in the Rocky Mountain Region’s current major project list. Several proposed toilet replacements and other small maintenance efforts may be funded from fee collections returned to the Forest. Table 2 (excerpted from page 9 of the POW) shows the aggregated cost savings results that would be realized from full implementation of the POW by 2021.

Table 1. Aggregated cost savings from implementation of the POW by 2021.

	Cost category	Current costs	Revised costs after implementation	Percentage of cost reduction after implementation
Expenses	Operations*	\$ 180,969	\$ 165,444	-9%
	Annual maintenance**	\$ 157,474	\$ 157,474	0%
	Deferred maintenance***	\$ 820,719	\$ 716,809	-12%

*Operating costs = cleaning toilets, litter, tables, fire rings etc., providing information, applying regulations.

**Annual maintenance = painting, refinishing, facility repairs, site grading, etc.

***Deferred maintenance = backlog of annual maintenance projects not conducted in a timely manner

Project timeline and public outreach

Forest Service recreation managers identified the need to respond to funding, identified process challenges, and developed a tool for evaluating the developed recreation facilities. This information was shared with the Bighorn National Forest's Forest Plan Steering Committee (Committee) and members of the public in attendance at the Committee's meeting on May 20, 2015.

The Committee is composed of locally elected representatives and members of state government with jurisdiction over some aspect of the Bighorn National Forest. The group originated with the 2005 revision of the Forest Plan and meets twice each year to monitor plan implementation by discussing issues and activities on the national forest. The meetings are announced in local media and are open to the public.

After great crunching of data and gnashing of teeth, the Forest Service produced a five-year program of work.

October 2014 to April 2015 Reviewed and updated recreation facilities database. Ranked all developed recreation sites against consistent criteria.

May 20, 2015 Outreach presentation to the Committee on the RSA process and the need for changes in recreation management.

May to August 2015 Prepared a draft POW for developed recreation sites. Proposed actions for each site. Actions were identified for each site from among 66 choices, ranging from no change to decommission and everything in between. These actions, also known as Management Options, were assigned after evaluation of each site using data analysis/cost evaluations, internal program/site knowledge, and feedback from the Forest Leadership Team.

August 24, 2015 Information added to the Bighorn web site on the RSA process.

August 27, 2015 Outreach at the Committee's field trip to describe anticipated changes in developed recreation site management as a result of the draft POW. These included reduced services and a shorter season at some sites, a fee increase at Hunter Campground, and the continued but declining backlog in deferred maintenance.

Revising and reviewing the Draft Program of Work

September 2015 to April 2016 Revised RSA analysis and Draft POW using the fiscal year 2015 budget, updated deferred maintenance data, refined operating cost estimates for interpretive sites, edited documents, prepared communication plan, etc.

April 28, 2016 Provided a draft executive summary of the draft recreation site analysis to the Steering Committee and members of the public attending the meeting for review and feedback.

May 2016 Briefed Rocky Mountain Regional Office staff. Share executive summary and Draft POW. Revise Draft POW as needed based on substantive feedback.

Public comment on the Draft Program of Work

June - July 2016 Released Draft POW to the public, constituents, and local governments for 30-day feedback period.

July - August 2016 Completed a content analysis for comments on the Draft POW and responded to individuals offering comments.

Final Program of Work available

September 27, 2016 Released the final POW to the public, constituents, and local governments.

Summary of the Plan of Work

Table 3 shows a summary of the management options for the developed recreation sites we analyzed. It indicates what is proposed for the sites (if anything) over the five-year life of the POW.

All sites must have at least one code assigned, but some required more than one code. Seventy-one sites were analyzed.

The most common change, affecting 52 sites, is a reduction in the frequency of services including the uniformed Forest Service presence, restroom cleaning, and litter collection. Community support to keep facilities clean and Forest Service monitoring to ensure that facilities meet standards for health and safety will be important for successful implementation. Repair or replacement of existing facilities to reduce deferred maintenance is planned for 17 percent of the sites, while no change is planned for 14 percent of sites

A comprehensive table on pages 15 through 24 in the POW shows management codes and descriptions.

Table 2. Summary of the management options for the developed recreation sites evaluated in the RSA.

Description of site management options	Number of sites affected	Percentage of sites affected
A - Decommission (all or partial)	1	1%
B - Closure	1	1%
C - Change Season	9	7%
D - Remove Or Eliminate Cost Source Or Service Season	3	2%
E - Reduce Service Frequency	52	42%
F - Increase/Improve Services	8	6%
G - Construct A New Site	0	0%
H - Change Operator	13	10%
I - Change Fees	1	1%
J - Change Capacity	2	2%
K - Site Conversion	0	0%
L - Replacement/Repair	13	10%
NC - No Change	21	17%
Total	124	

Changes in services

This summary highlights changes we think are most likely to be of interest.

Fall season

Traditionally the Forest Service kept campgrounds open with reduced services and reduced or no fees after the main summer use season, nominally the hunting season. Water is not provided because systems are drained to prevent damage from freezing temperatures. Reduced services typically involve toilet cleaning and maintenance in addition to general site clean-up. Providing these services requires regular attention by Forest Service staff after user numbers decline and concession operations are no longer profitable.

Following the 2008 RFA, 18 of the 30 developed campgrounds remained open through the fall season. To reduce staff costs, the RSA proposes to reduce the number of campgrounds remaining open in the fall from 18 to 11. The seven campgrounds proposed to be closed at the end of the summer season include **East Fork, Ranger Creek (on Red Grade Road / Forest Service Road 26), Bald Mountain, Lower Paintrock Lake, Medicine Lodge Lake, Porcupine, and Ranger Creek (on Paintrock Road / Forest Service Road 17)**. Gates would be added to the campground entrance road at most of these sites for seasonal closure.

Reduced staff presence and cleaning

The presence of uniformed employees to enhance security and provide visitor information at developed recreation sites would also be reduced by eliminating some paid seasonal positions. Cleaning and stocking restrooms, cleaning tables and fire rings, and removing abandoned refuse – particularly at day use sites such as picnic grounds, parking areas, and trailheads – would be reduced. Additional volunteer positions may be established to help provide some of these services.

Removing improvements

Picnic grounds No facilities have been identified for complete decommissioning. Removing seldom used picnic sites (tables and grills) at **Twin Lakes and Sibley Lake Dam** picnic grounds was identified as a way to reduce deferred maintenance. Four of the 10 picnic sites would be retained at Twin Lakes and eight of 11 picnic sites at Sibley Lake Dam would be retained. The number of sites remaining is expected to meet visitor demand.

West Tensleep Corridor A 2012 NEPA decision to decommission **Deer Park Campground**, if and when the capacity can be replaced by a new facility (proposed Warner Draw Campground) is documented in the POW. The existing **West Tensleep Lake Campground** would be relocated further from the lake shore as part of the same NEPA decision. The proposed changes in the West Tensleep Corridor along Forest Service Road 27 are based on resource protection and wilderness management. Prospects for funding capital improvement construction in West Tensleep Corridor are currently dim.

Sand Turn Overlook Two sites – Forest Portal and Crystal Springs Rest Area - on U S Highway 14 are identified as beginning a glide path for decommissioning. The sites could be removed if and when a Sand Turn Overlook is developed. Planning, in partnership with the Wyoming Department of Transportation, has been initiated. Construction funding has not been identified.

Ranger Creek Campground This site is located along Shell Creek on the Paintrock Road (Forest Service Road 17). It includes a group area and family campsites. The Adelaide Trailhead is located in the same area. A proposal to redevelop the area includes removing family campsites subject to seasonal flooding and improved parking for the trailhead. Any redevelopment would depend on funding opportunities.

Changing fees

Fees at most fee sites are established by the concessionaire operating under terms established in a business prospectus and permitting process. Currently the Forest Service operates and establishes fees for rental cabins and **Hunter Campground**. The only change in fees proposed as part of the RSA is at Hunter Campground.

Hunter was relocated and constructed in 2012 to accommodate campers with horses, including corrals and manure management. The typical Bighorn campsite fee is currently \$15 to 16 per night, but the fee at Hunter has remained below market at \$10 per night. A proposed fee of \$18 per night will need to go through a public review process including review by REACT, the Wyoming Recreation Action Team. The higher fee will help cover the additional operation cost of handling, hauling, and disposing of manure.

In summary, changes are needed to reduce costs and restructure work to reach a sustainable recreation program over the long term. This analysis of developed recreation sites and preparation of a five-year program of work are a critical step in that process.