

Recreation Facility Strategy on Mark Twain National Forest

Questions and Answers

What is Recreation Site Analysis (RSA) and the Recreation Facility Strategy (RFS)?

Recreation Site Analysis is a comprehensive analysis of the Forest's developed recreation sites. Forest recreation specialists inventoried and assessed 159 recreation sites, campgrounds, picnic grounds, trailheads, boat landings, beach, observation points, and interpretive sites to determine the sites' values in contributing to recreation demand and preferences, environmental integrity, and the economic vitality of the forest and its communities.

The purpose of RSA was to evaluate how the Mark Twain National Forest can best provide quality and sustainable recreation opportunities in the long-run, given current and projected financial and staffing constraints as well as existing and projected visitor demands. The Forest looked at the type of recreation sites and amenities offered across the landscape of southern Missouri (state, county, town, and private) to identify gaps or overlaps in recreation opportunities.

Developed site benefits and costs were evaluated in consideration of the effects on the rest of the recreation programs, such as wilderness and heritage program management, administration of outfitter/guide, motor vehicle use, visitor information, and other recreation services.

The result of this analysis is the 5-year Recreation Facility Strategy that the Mark Twain National Forest will use to prioritize investments, as well as pursue changes in operations or maintenance of developed recreation sites and facilities. The strategy is intended to reduce operations and maintenance costs and maximize public benefits, while balancing social, economic, and environmental factors.

How was public feedback incorporated into the draft Recreation Facility Strategy?

Public feedback was critical to ensuring the draft RFS would incorporate the interests of our visitors and partners. Early outreach and communication efforts in the winter of 2020 brought to light the most significant public concerns regarding recreation activities and sites that they value. As a result, key adjustments were made to the proposed management actions that were sent out for public comment in the late spring of 2020.

The Mark Twain National Forest solicited comments from February 4-March 6, 2020. The feedback received was taken into consideration in drafting the 5-year Recreation Facility Strategy.

What is the difference between operating vs. maintenance costs?

Operating costs include toilet cleaning, trash pickup, mowing, patrols, and other daily duties. Maintenance costs include repairing doors, re-roofing buildings, repairing broken boards, etc.

How much will the implementation of RFS reduce the operations and maintenance costs of the developed recreation program on the Mark Twain National Forest?

If all changes are made, the anticipated cost savings for operations and maintenance would be about \$128,000 per year Forest-wide, or a reduction of about 16 percent from current costs.

Will those reductions in operations and maintenance costs be adequate to sustain the program?

The projected savings of 16-percent of annual operations and maintenance costs will not fully compensate for the overall budget challenges the Forest has faced over the last decade in the recreation program.

However, these changes, as well as other cost saving measures the Forest is working on within the recreation program, will allow us to operate and maintain our recreation areas to standards providing a positive user experience.

More significant changes and/or reductions in developed recreation site services were initially discussed however, not recommended at this time.

The recreation program includes more than just developed recreation sites. Without these important changes the current and future projected costs of the developed recreation program will prevent the Forest from addressing other important program components, such as, motorized trails, non-motorized trails, wilderness, dispersed recreation, and special uses.

How much will implementation of the RSF actions cost the Forest?

The Forest estimated that full implementation costs over the next five years will be approximately \$559,000. This includes improvements, site conversions to general forest and other actions identified in the RFS. Funding for projects will come from fee dollars collected, annual appropriations and other, internal and external, funding sources. Additional funding sources are being pursued and/or will be needed.

Could actions identified in the Recreation Facility Strategy shift as a result of changed conditions or additional public/partner engagement?

All actions in the RFS are proposals requiring implementation actions. The Forest expects to begin implementing proposals from the 5-year Recreation Facility Strategy during the 2021 recreation season. Some actions may require a level of environmental analysis through the National Environmental Policy Act. Proposed management actions may shift slightly as a result of continued public input and changing conditions, but projected agency funding and resources will still constrain the total number of sites and services the Forest Service can provide into the future.

Annually, the Forest will review and prioritize the actions identified in the Recreation Facility Strategy.

The draft proposed management actions included the statement “a partner will be pursued” for several sites. What is the plan for those sites in the RFS?

The Forest welcomes partner engagement at all of our recreation sites. We have identified some unique sites through RSA that would be opportunities for a partner to operate and maintain. If partners are not found, the Forest will consider the trade-offs of investing in the site or converting the site to a general forest area.

Incorporating sustainability into recreation program management requires us to make choices about what to say “yes” and “no” to. We often find that it’s easy to say “yes,” particularly when a partner has funding to support a project. But having funding does not mean that the project contributes to sustainability or the overall goals of the recreation program.

When might changes called for in the Final RFS be made to recreation sites?

All actions in this RFS are proposals requiring implementation actions. The Forest expects to begin implementing proposals from the 5-year Recreation Facility Strategy during the 2021 recreation season. Some actions may require a level of environmental analysis through the National Environmental Policy Act. Other actions that do not constitute ground disturbing actions may be implemented immediately or as soon as funding and capacity to do so is available.

What does the wording “propose to establish/increase recreation use fee or camping fee” mean?

As part of a separate but concurrent effort, the Forest is going through a process to implement recreation fee changes. The proposal includes 11 new fees and 24 fee changes at campgrounds, day use sites, and group camping or day use areas. Information about the proposed fee changes can be found on the Mark Twain National Forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/mtnf>

Revenue generated by the proposed fees would be used to leverage federal funding, grants, and partnership contributions to fund maintenance and upgrades to features and facilities such as toilets; docks and ramps; picnic tables and grills; parking lots and access roads; interpretive and informational signing; and to restore natural resources damaged by visitor use. These increases will also ensure that recreation fees remain comparable to similar public and private campground facilities in the area and will provide consistency throughout the Forest.

The public is invited to comment on the proposed fee changes through September 1, 2020. Comments can be submitted via mail or hand delivery to the Mark Twain National Forest Supervisor’s Office, 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, MO 65401. Alternatively, comments can be emailed to SM.FS.MTNF_Rec@usda.gov. Please put in subject line “Recreation Fee Proposal” or submit through the comment form found on the forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/mtnf>.

Are any sites going to be closed or be decommissioned?

The Forest is planning to convert 14 sites to general forest area as infrastructure is removed. The access to these sites will be maintained through roads listed as open on the Motor Vehicle Use Map if roads already exist.

The removal of infrastructure and site conversions will occur as resources and funding are available. These are sites that typically have low visitation and a higher operation and maintenance cost.

What does the wording “convert back to general forest areas” mean?

General forest areas are anywhere in the Forest open to the public where there is no active recreation management such as hazard tree removal, regular trash collections, routine patrols or other restrictions. These areas are typically also void of improvements like fire rings, toilets and picnic tables.

What does the wording “alternative funding sources as available” mean?

The Forest may have the capability to supplement recreation program funding through

alternative, internal & external funding sources. The recreation sites with proposed management actions that include this language will happen only if alternative funding sources were to become available or after completion of proposed actions in the 5-year RFS. These funds are limited on scope of use or amount and will be diluted by that volume of requests we are seeking for improvements.

Is the draft Recreation Facility Strategy consistent with the Forest Plan?

The actions in the Recreation Facility Strategy are consistent with the Framework for Sustainable Recreation and the 2005 Mark Twain Land and Resource Management Plan. The Forest Plan guidance pertaining to the Recreation Facility Strategy is below. The 5-year Recreation Facility Strategy will provide more detailed information as the Forest builds a sustainable recreation program, balancing economic, social, and environmental benefits, and meeting public needs within fiscal constraints.

Forest Plan Guidance pertaining to Recreation Facilities Strategy

Goal 2.8

Provide a diversity of recreational opportunities and benefits through a variety of settings.

Contribute to local, regional, and national economies by providing recreational opportunities in a socially and environmentally acceptable manner.

- Provide recreation facilities only if needed to protect public health and safety; for site protection within Recreation opportunity spectrum capacity levels; to meet documented demands of existing or targeted users.
- Drop fees and remove signs when services or facilities are not available or if collection of fees is not cost effective. Encourage donations in areas where a fee system is not appropriate only if it is economically feasible or beneficial.
- Make investments in recreation management as needed to meet the needs and desires of the public being served or targeted to be served at the facility, protect the site, follow riparian guidelines, and meet recreation opportunity spectrums classification objectives.