

Dispersed Camping in your National Forests



Can I have a campfire? You should always contact the local district office to ask if there are any fire restrictions in effect or visit [Southwest Area Fire Restrictions](#).

There are basically two types of camping in your National Forests: camping in a developed campground and dispersed camping. Dispersed camping is the term used for camping anywhere in the National Forest outside of a developed campground. Dispersed camping is free and, therefore, there are no services such as trash removal and there are few, if any, facilities such as tables and fire pits.

There are extra responsibilities and skills that are necessary for dispersed camping. It is your responsibility to know these before you go camping. Camping rules and regulations are in place to make your experience a safe one and to protect natural and cultural resources so they remain unspoiled for other forest visitors.

What about dispersed camping with a motor vehicle?

The rules for motorized vehicles vary on each National Forest, so be sure to check with the local district office for more information.

There are many opportunities for motorized dispersed camping. Visitors may drive up to 300 feet from the sides of all open roads or may use the wider motorized dispersed camping areas established on each district. For details on where it is legal to drive motor vehicles on the Gila National Forest, please download the free [Motor Vehicle Use Maps](#).

Rules for dispersed camping:

1. Have fun! Follow the “**Know Before You Go**” camping tips at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/visit/know-before-you-go> in order to have a safe, low impact, primitive camping experience.
2. If possible, use existing campsites to limit resource damage.
3. Be prepared. No amenities – such as water, trash cans or restrooms are provided.
4. Follow Leave No Trace principles at www.LNT.org & Tread Lightly at www.treadlightly.org/.
5. Camping within 1 mile of a developed campground, administrative site or other developed recreation site is prohibited.
6. Camping within one-quarter of a mile of a watering hole is prohibited as it denies the wildlife and domestic livestock access to available water.
7. If fire restrictions are not in effect, please use existing fire rings if available. This minimizes scarring of rocks, soil and plants.
8. Dead & down firewood may be collected and used for your campfire. Do not cut live trees.
9. Camping more than 14 days in any 30-day period is not authorized, per Title 36 Code of Federal Regulations, Section 261.50(a).



Common Watch-outs!

High winds can bring danger from above. Be cautious of widow makers, loose limbs, or treetops lodged in a tree, which may fall on anyone beneath one.

Beware when encountering wildlife. To ward off bears, keep your campsite clean, and do not leave food, garbage, coolers, cooking equipment or utensils out in the open. Remember that bears can be dangerous and unpredictable – never feed or approach a bear. Use a flashlight at night – many animals feed at night and the use of a flashlight may warn them that you are approaching.

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Tips on treating your water!

There is NO safe water source anymore.

With an increasing population and visitation to our National Forest, water sources have been contaminated with invisible microorganisms that can make people very ill and in some cases could be deadly. As an example, Giardia is a microscopic parasite that causes diarrheal illness. While the parasite can be spread in different ways, water is the most common mode of transmission.

The only way to ensure that water from any undeveloped source is safe is to treat it. Follow the water treatment guidelines recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/travel/index.html.

Human Waste Disposal in the Backcountry

Dispersed camping means no bathrooms. Deposit solid human waste in catholes dug 6 to 8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water, camp, and trails. Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products. Disposing of waste water or material on National Forest System Land is against federal regulation per Title 36 Code of Federal Regulations, Section 261.11 (d). For more information on disposing of human waste - <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles/dispose-of-waste-properly/>

