

# RECREATION FACILITY ANALYSIS ON THE BLACK HILLS NATIONAL FOREST

## Questions & Answers

---

### 1. What is RFA?

Recreation Facility Analysis (RFA) is a study tool being used nationally to help national forests create a sustainable program that matches their developed recreation sites with visitors' desires and use. RFA helped to ensure that our developed recreation sites make sense considering the Black Hills National Forest's special characteristics. The RFA tool carefully assessed where we should focus investments and energy to be as responsive as possible to visitors' needs. By understanding our visitors' needs, national forests can make more informed decisions that match available resources to visitor recreation preferences and patterns.

### 2. Why did the Black Hills National Forest go through this process?

Each National Forest across the country was directed to examine their recreation facilities and evaluate how they might operate and maintain these structures and sites more efficiently – both as prudent financial managers and in terms of meeting the changing needs of our public. Because many facilities built in the 1950s and 1960s are reaching the end of their useful life, the Black Hills National Forest needed to make hard decisions about which facilities continue to meet the demands of users and which facilities were no longer suitable.

### 3. How will the public benefit from this analysis process?

RFA will result in higher quality, more efficiently managed recreation sites with facilities aligned with the wants and expectations of visitors.

### 4. Isn't this just a way to get rid of recreation sites?

No. Actually the objective is to have better sites for the public to use. The Black Hills National Forest is working towards having a moderate number of high quality sites, rather than having a large number of sites, many of which are seldom used and don't meet a high standard of quality. Quality is better than quantity is the basic premise. Many factors were considered in evaluating each developed recreation site. These considerations were related to how well a site supports the recreation needs of the public on the Black Hills National Forest, the role that sites play in the local

community, and the site's relationship to the environment.

**5. Is the Forest Service privatizing recreation venues on public lands?**

Recreation opportunities on the national forests and grasslands are provided in many ways. Currently, the majority of our developed recreation facilities are operated and maintained by private concession service partners selected through a highly competitive process. Other sites are operated and maintained by the Forest Service and supported through the efforts of volunteers and non-profit partnerships.

Private interests providing recreation opportunities on public lands is a long-standing practice and is one of the options a forest considers when determining how to best manage a particular recreation site. It makes sense, in some cases, to have private interests, who have the resources, the business savvy, and a good visitor service ethic to construct and operate desired recreation opportunities like marinas, caves, or, in other cases, to take over daily management of tasks like operating campgrounds. Alpine ski areas have long been managed by private companies, and outfitters and guides provide a variety of services for many recreation activities. Concession operation is one option a national forest considers when determining how to best manage a particular recreation site.

**6. What happens to sites that are currently operated by a concessionaire?**

Those sites were also evaluated through the RFA process for possible efficiencies in operation. Any proposed changes in operation will be negotiated with the concessionaire, within the framework of their current permit or solicited through a competitive prospectus offering.

**7. In an era when recreation demand is increasing, shouldn't the Forest Service also be increasing the number of recreation sites?**

Recreation on national forest lands takes many forms. Use is increasing, but it doesn't necessarily involve developed facilities. RFA focuses on developed recreation – one piece of the overall recreation program. RFA helped the Forest Service understand what people are doing, where they are recreating on the landscape, and what facilities may or may not be needed to support those activities. The Forest Service gathered and considered this type of information before finalizing our plan.

**8. What did the Forest Service use to establish recreation needs?**

RFA looked at what forests offer in terms of recreation opportunities and what the public wanted in terms of outdoor recreation on public land. The Forest Service used a blend of public participation and data analysis in the process. Market and demographic survey information was used to describe the majority of the visitors to a specific national forest and one-on-one survey information from visitors to that national forest (National Visitor Use Monitoring survey). The Forest Service also

used information collected on a statistical basis from the entire country (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment). In addition, each forest included public participation and input throughout the entire process, as they worked to develop a five-year program of work for their forest's developed recreation sites program. Involvement of the local public, surrounding communities and each national forest's recreation visitors was a critical and essential component of the RFA process. This helped to ensure the national forest is providing the best recreation opportunities in the right places.

**9. How was the public be involved?**

The public was involved in the entire RFA process. Initially, the public was involved through survey results and demographic information. Forests also engaged local communities and stakeholders in a dialogue about a forest's special settings and opportunities and visitors' needs and expectations (niche). After ensuring data were adequate for initial analysis and including any public input received at this point, staff prepared, shared, reviewed, and discussed a **proposed 5-year program of work** with the public, national forest visitors, and local communities. Throughout the five-year plan period, public involvement and feedback will be important to ensure that the Forest Service continues to meet visitor and community needs and provides the best recreation opportunities in the best places.

**10. How many and what types of recreation sites are affected and on what kind of timetable?**

All developed sites, such as campgrounds, trailheads, interpretive sites, boat launches, and picnic sites were analyzed and may experience changes. However, many changes to recreation sites won't be noticeable by the visiting public. Changes will occur during a five-year implementation period of the RFA with advice from the public to help improve the planned program of work.

**11. How soon will the public notice any changes in management of developed recreation sites?**

Some changes may occur in the near future, but may not be noticeable to the public. Other changes may be more complex, requiring additional analysis and public involvement, so may take a long period of time.

**12. Will some sites be permanently closed?**

In some cases, this could be an outcome. However, closing a site does not necessarily mean that the location can no longer be used. The Forest Service may change the level of services provided at a site, such as removing a toilet or a water system at a campground, but the public may still be able to camp in the same location or use the site with a more rustic experience.

**13. How does RFA relate to Forest Plan Revision, Travel Management and other planning efforts?**

There is a consistent tie between RFA and other planning efforts. The RFA gives guidance to travel management and can be used to help describe the desired future condition in forest plan revisions. Where other planning efforts have occurred prior to RFA, it builds on and tiers from them, adding a qualitative and focused look at the developed recreation program.

**14. How can partners or volunteer groups be involved in recreation facilities?**

For sites that have strong community or visitor support, offers to operate and maintain those sites will be considered. A partnership needs to be a long-term commitment that provides consistency for communities that value a particular site.

**15. How does RFA influence and help support local tourism goals?**

The Black Hills National Forest recognizes the importance of recreation and tourism to many communities in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. Public participation included discussion of local tourism goals and how recreation sites help meet those goals.

**16. How does RFA work into the future? Will new sites ever be developed? Will current sites ever be re-evaluated?**

RFA helps us efficiently use our available resources to provide the best quality recreation opportunities possible. In so doing, we position ourselves to better respond to changing recreation demands with facilities and programs in the future. The Black Hills National Forest will *review the RFA five-year program of work every year* to monitor how well we are implementing it and whether modifications are required. As new sites are needed to help carry out the developed recreation program, proposed sites would be evaluated with an appropriate level of public involvement through the RFA process to ensure the public's needs would be met with new sites.

**17. Is the Forest Service planning to sell recreation sites.**

No. There are no plans to sell recreation sites.

**18. What types of recreation facilities were evaluated by the RFA?**

The RFA process only evaluated recreation sites with facilities such as campgrounds and picnic areas; it did not deal with roads or trails, or with undeveloped sites such as dispersed campsites and wilderness.

**19. Were public comments about recreation facilities limited to a brief period of time?**

An important part of the RFA process was to invite public participation and comment about site-specific modifications to existing facilities. The Black Hills National Forest invites ongoing public comment about improvements to recreation facilities. The RFA will be reviewed on an annual basis and can be modified or amended. Public comments about recreation sites and facilities are always welcome.

## **20. Is Recreation Facility Analysis something new?**

National forests have always evaluated and modified existing recreation facilities to keep them current with use-trends and public needs; however, processes varied from one forest to another. Recreation Facility Analysis standardized the evaluation and modification of recreation facilities nationwide and improved communication and cooperation with the visiting public and local communities.

## **21. How is the Black Hills National Forest using RFA?**

Many of the Black Hills's developed recreation sites were built 30-60 years ago. Since then, visitor preferences and demographics have changed, and some older facilities must be replaced or removed. To respond to these conditions, the Black Hills National Forest has developed the Recreation Facility Analysis (RFA). The Forest Service is committed to responsibly serving the public by operating efficiently and providing appropriate, quality recreation opportunities. The RFA will help.

## **22. What are the goals of RFA?**

- i. Sustain recreation opportunities consistent with the Forest's "recreation niche" (the unique recreation experiences the Black Hills National Forest is best suited to provide)
- ii. Keep up with the demand for recreation facilities on all ranger districts
- iii. Operate and maintain recreation sites to national standards of health and safety
- iv. Improve the quality of recreation facilities by reducing the deferred maintenance backlog.

## **23. When did the RFA process start?**

In the spring of 2006, Black Hills NF employees took a critical look at all developed recreation opportunities, including what they cost, how much they were used, and whether they met user expectations. The Forest's recreation program needed to become more focused on what people typically come to the Black Hills to experience. The first steps of the analysis involved data collection (by surveying the public and assessing facilities), defining the Forest's "recreation niche," and ranking all developed recreation sites on the forest (using a scientific computer model that incorporates things like costs, use levels, and conformance with niche).

#### **24. What is the Black Hills NF's recreation niche?**

The Black Hills National Forest is a regionally important recreation destination, rich with natural, cultural, and Native American history. This Island in the Plains connects visitors and communities with a working landscape highlighted by a well managed ponderosa pine forest, lakes and geology characterized by caves, canyons and spires. Wyoming has hardwoods such as aspen, birch and oak more abundant than elsewhere on the forest.

With several national icons nestled among the pines of the Black Hills National Forest, the Forest serves as the backdrop for these symbols of America. Specialized campgrounds, roaded recreation opportunities and a system of trails connecting communities showcase this forest that provides user friendly access to year-round family activities. Together, the attractive features of the Black Hills National Forest, Custer State Park, and area National Parks, memorials, and monuments are the foundation for the local recreation economies.

#### **25. What are the planned changes to campgrounds and picnic areas on the Black Hills National Forest?**

Out of 110 developed recreation sites Forest-wide, aging facilities will be replaced and improved at eight sites across the Forest:

- Roubaix Campground (Northern Hills RD)
- Long Valley Picnic Ground (Northern Hills RD)
- Bismarck Lake Boating Site (Hell Canyon RD)
- Wrinkled Rock Trailhead / Campground (Hell Canyon RD)
- Redbank Spring Campground (Hell Canyon RD)
- Reuter Campground (Bearlodge RD)
- Sundance Campground (Bearlodge RD)
- Boxelder Forks Campground (Northern Hills RD)

Two sites will have expanded parking:

- Horsethief Lake Day Use Area (Hell Canyon RD)
- Lakota Lake Picnic Ground (Hell Canyon RD)

Eight sites will be decommissioned (have all or most facilities removed), but most of these will remain available as dispersed recreation areas. Also, wherever sites are decommissioned, similar facilities will remain available at other locations in the general area. The eight sites approved for decommissioning include the following:

- Comanche Park Campground (Hell Canyon RD)
- Iron Mountain Picnic Ground will be converted to a trailhead with all improvements removed except parking (Hell Canyon RD)

- Moon Campground (Hell Canyon RD)
- Custer Trails Campground (Mystic RD)
- Mountain City Picnic Ground (Mystic RD)
- Botany Bay Picnic Ground (Northern Hills RD)
- Hells Gate Picnic Ground (Northern Hills RD)
- Dugout Gulch Trailhead (Bearlodge RD)
- Terry Peak Observation Site (Northern Hills RD)

The Forest-wide summary of modifications include:

- **Total of 110 Sites**
- Replace, improve, or add facilities at **38** sites
- Find Stewardship Partners at **10** sites
- Decommission **9** sites
- Reduce facilities at **8** sites
- Reduce season or days of operation at **10** sites
- Change the operator at **26** sites including adding concession operations at **5**.

## **26. Why are you making these changes?**

Some facilities on the Forest are rarely used. The cost of maintenance just can't be justified. Instead, maintenance funds can be better allocated to improving other sites.

Some sites are redundant because they are located near other similar privately owned or publicly owned recreation sites. Consolidating such sites will continue to provide recreation opportunities in an area, but less land will be impacted.

Some sites do not meet the recreation focus or "recreation niche" of the Forest. These facilities do not meet visitor expectations. Sites that consistently disappoint users aren't worth keeping.

Facilities that do not comply with modern standards of health and safety must be removed or replaced.

The proposed plan meets targets of fiscal responsibility, meets mandatory standards, and retires deferred maintenance work. (See plan for complete information.)

**27. Will the RFA process improve recreation opportunities on the Black Hills National Forest?**

Yes. The Black Hills will remain a place where visitors can find a wide range of quality recreation settings and opportunities. Most of the actions in the RFA plan (a 5-year program of work) focus on improving the overall value of forest-wide recreation facilities while causing the least inconvenience or disruption to users, such as reducing seasons or days of operation when visitation is light or non-existent, removing substandard, dilapidated, or redundant facilities, and building new partnerships with interested users to improve site stewardship. The RFA helps to align the Forest recreation program with the results of past public survey responses.

**28. When was the RFA finalized?**

It was finalized after the public had at least 30 days to submit comments, and after Forest officials reviewed and considered those comments and incorporated any changes. The process was completed in July of 2008.

**29. Who was the decision-maker?**

Craig Bobzien, Black Hills Forest Supervisor, signed the RFA.

**30. When will modifications identified by the RFA be implemented?** Implementation is expected to begin in the Fall of 2008, and will take place over 5 to 15 years.

**31. Does RFA require any environmental analysis?** NEPA work is not required to complete the RFA. Major modifications to recreation sites that result from the RFA require appropriate NEPA analysis.

**32. How can I comment?** The Black Hills NF recognizes the importance of recreation sites and welcomes written comments and suggestions via email at [comments-blackhills@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-blackhills@fs.fed.us). Public participation is important to ensure the RFA meets visitor needs and expectations in a cost-effective manner. Comments from the public about recreation facilities are welcome anytime.