

# Bighorn National Forest Dispersed Camping Regulations

## Questions and Answers

### 1. Is there an occupancy rule in the Bighorn National Forest?

Yes, when the Forest Service received an updated Code of Federal Regulations in January of 2025, all national forests in the system now have a prohibition on personal property being left unattended for more than 72 hours, unless otherwise designated. There are no exceptions in the Bighorn National Forest, and this is in effect forest wide.

### 2. 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 away from your previous camp. You cannot return to the original camp location until another 14 days has passed.

### 3. What is 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.

### 4. 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](#).

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 in bear country](#)

[Living in bear country](#)

[Bear Wise](#)

**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, along with the existing two law enforcement officers, each ranger district on the Forest hired additional permanent staff (Forest Protection Officers, FPO) to assist with enforcement of all Forest 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 was implemented in 2023. FPOs began using technology in the form of hand-held tablets with an application designed to track campers for a 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 former storage location on the Medicine Wheel Ranger District is not in compliance with our regulations and will no longer be allowed. 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 violation notice with a mandatory appearance requirement before a Federal Magistrate in Federal Court. Penalties can vary from monetary fines to bans from recreation on public lands for a period of time

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

Bighorn National Forest Law Enforcement officers (LEO) ask for license and registrations

data. This is done regularly, but must be based upon constitutional law and reasonable suspicion an offence is occurring.

**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 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, thus reducing their ability to have a positive camping experience.

**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 the 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 leads 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 required for groups of 75 or more people.

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

The current regulations pertaining to camping will expire at the end of 2027. Forest personnel will review enforcement data compiled over the years until it expires and report back to the Forest Supervisor. If there is no improvement in compliance with the regulations pertaining to camping, alternative/additional regulations may be implemented to meet management goals.

Forest personnel 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 issued in May 2023 and reissued March 2024),
  - 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.