June 2026

Unauthorized Large Group Use Incident (Rainbow Family Gathering) on National Forests

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the Rainbow Family of Living Light?

   The Rainbow Family of Living Light is a loose-knit group of people who gather annually on a national forest. They describe themselves as having no leaders and no organization.

2. What is the Annual Gathering?

   The Rainbow Family holds a national gathering once a year. Since the first gathering near Strawberry Lake on the Arapaho National Forest in 1972, the incident has taken place on a different national forest each year. Estimated attendance for the last three years was around 2,000 participants at each gathering. In 2022, about 10,000 individuals were estimated to attend the 50th anniversary gathering in Colorado. Local and regional gatherings occur during other times of the year.

3. How does the Rainbow Family decide where to gather?

   At the end of each annual gathering, participants form a “vision council” to meet to discuss the location of the following year’s event.

   At the end of last year’s gathering the participants held a vision council and shared that this year’s annual gathering would likely occur in New York or Pennsylvania according to the Rainbows. This would include areas on the Finger Lakes National Forest or Allegheny National Forest.

4. How and when is the specific site selected?

   During the spring and early summer, Rainbow scouts research and visit areas to find a suitable location, according to their standards. Scouts may visit local Forest Service offices requesting information and maps. In mid-June they will hold a spring council, typically close to where the annual gathering will take place. The specific location and time are not usually revealed to the Forest Service until this happens.

5. When does the Annual Gathering begin?

   Within one week of the spring council about 500 participants will be on site. There will be a continual build-up of gathering participants reaching 2,000-5,000 people depending on the location by July 4. Once the site is determined, the gathering participants use the internet and other communication methods to let others know the location and directions to the site.

6. When does the gathering end?

   The incident peaks on July 4. After that, there is a drastic reduction in participants. However,

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there is typically a group of gathering participants that stay to clean up and rehabilitate the site. There may be other individuals as well that remain for a couple weeks.

7. Does the Rainbow Family get a special use permit?

   Forest Service regulations require all noncommercial group use, defined as activities that have no entry or participation fee charged nor the primary purpose being the sale of a good or service and activities being conducted on National Forest System lands that involve 75 or more people, be authorized by the Forest Service through a special use permit for noncommercial group use.

   Large group gatherings in national forests can adversely affect the forest resources, public health and safety, and the availability of public lands. The Forest Service has a responsibility to manage these issues through special use authorizations.

   The Rainbow Family has consistently refused to comply with the permit process during national gatherings. They claim to have no leaders and no one member of the group who can speak for them or sign a permit on behalf of the group.

8. How does the Forest Service respond to this incident?

   The Forest Service assigns a National Incident Management Team to the incident. Team objectives include:
   - Address health and safety risks to the public and participants.
   - Minimize environmental impacts with Law Enforcement presence and action.
   - Recognize and mitigate social and political impacts.
   - Respect civil rights of all members of the public.
   - Work in partnership with tribal, state, county, and local law enforcement, health, and other organizations.

9. How does a large group, potentially 2,000 to 5,000 people, live in the woods?

   As soon as gathering participants select a site, they set up a welcome tent, camping and social areas, parking and shuttle areas, health care areas, and several outdoor kitchens. They develop water sources and dig trench latrines. There is no fee for attendance, but they collect donations for food and other necessary items for distribution. They designate special areas for group gatherings, families with children, men, women, and partygoers, to name a few. Attendees are advised to bring their own camping gear.

10. What resource impacts may occur?

    Possible resource impacts include compacted soil, water quality degradation, sanitation issues, disturbance to sensitive archaeological sites, disruptions to threatened and endangered plant and animal species, and fire danger.

    The Forest Service mobilizes a National Incident Management Team with experience managing these types of incidents. The team works closely with the local community, including law enforcement agencies, throughout the incident to protect the health and safety of everyone involved, and to lessen environmental impacts and enforce laws.

11. What social impacts are expected?

    The group represents a very diverse group of individuals. As with any large population, a certain percentage of incident participants can be expected to engage in illegal or socially unacceptable behaviors. In part, some activities may include public nudity, civil disobedience, drug and alcohol

abuse, confrontations between Rainbows and locals, abandoned or disabled vehicles, and traffic congestion and parking for 500-700 vehicles.

12. Can the participants use campfires if fire restrictions are in place?

    No. All national forest visitors must obey federal, state, and local laws and regulations, including fire restrictions.

13. Will fire restrictions be put in place to reduce the likelihood of a wildfire during the incident?

    Fire restrictions will be put in place under all normal protocols. Fire prevention and law enforcement will be patrolling, and enforcing federal, state, and local laws and regulations.

14. Does the Forest Service test the water?

    The Forest Service or a partner does conduct water quality testing as part of the regular monitoring procedures. If during these tests the data indicates there is a problem, the appropriate health departments will be contacted, and possible closure orders will be put in place.

15. What role does the state and county play in this incident?

    Management of the incident is coordinated by the National Forest and National Incident Management Team with local officials, including all Tribal, federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies, as well as emergency service organizations, public health departments, and social services.

16. Will there be any special closure orders in effect?

    The Forest may issue special closure orders to protect the health and safety of visitors and/or natural resources that could be impacted by the incident.

17. Will the area of the incident be open to the public?

    Yes. However, all national forest visitors must obey federal, state, and local laws and regulations. The Forest Service takes the enforcement of those laws very seriously. There may be impacts to the community, neighbors, and other forest visitors. The Forest Service will work hard to minimize any negative effects to local communities and the environment.