



Dispersed Camping

Three Chimneys above Long Valley. Forest Service photo by Robin Lee Roney.

Dispersed camping allows forest visitors to recreate off the beaten path. However, this solitude and tranquility come with greater responsibility. Dispersed camping sites do not offer any services or infrastructure—there is no water, toilets, electricity, picnic tables, trash collection, or parking. We rely on you to recreate responsibly and follow Leave No Trace principles: plan ahead and prepare, travel and camp on durable surfaces, dispose of waste properly, leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife, and be considerate of other visitors. It is up to you to find a permissible camping spot and to practice outdoor ethics. Always check with the nearest Forest Service ranger station for current forest orders, conditions, and inclement weather warnings in the area.

Regulations

- The maximum cumulative days camping in any forest ranger district is 21 per calendar year. 36 CFR 261.50(a)
- Dispersed campers are permitted to park within one vehicle length (including any tow vehicle) of a national forest transportation route and walk into camp.
- Dispersed camping is not allowed within a designated developed recreation area. 36 CFR 261.16(e)
- You must remove all of your belongings and trash when you vacate your campsite. 36 CFR 261.16(f)



An RV, tent and camp site on a forest road. Forest Service photo.

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Things to Know

Winter and Spring Road Closures

From December 15 to April 15, all forest roads are subject to seasonal closures due to winter weather.*

Due to this type of closure, traditional dispersed camping is not available during this time. However, some CA SNO-Parks allow you to camp overnight in your vehicle with a valid SNO-Park pass, check each one for restrictions.

**Some will open to over snow use if the requisite snow depth is reached, subject to vehicle restrictions, talk to a forest ranger about winter camping options.*

Things to Know continued...

Finding a Campsite

Use existing campsites in lieu of clearing new sites. If you want to have a campfire, find a site with an existing fire ring, do not make a new one. Although it's natural for campers to want to stay near water sources, camp at least 100 feet away from edges of meadows, lakes, or streams for personal safety and to minimize damage to critical wildlife and riparian areas.

Water Sources

It's best to bring your own water supply. If you are going to use water from a lake, stream, or spring make sure you run it through a 0.5-micron filter, treat it, or boil it first.

Travel and Access to the Forest

The Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) displays seasonal openings of national forest roads and trails designated for motorized travel use. It is most easily used in conjunction with a forest visitor map. MVUMs are free to the public at each ranger district office, on our website:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r05/stanislaus/maps-guides> and can also be freely downloaded for offline use on the Avenza app.

Visitors should always consult road signs on forest roads to confirm what vehicle use is allowed on a given road. However, not all roads and junctions may be signed. Ultimately, it is your responsibility to know where you are allowed to travel with your vehicle. Stay on established, open routes. Each pass of a tire over terrain redefines a track, wanted or unwanted. In a closed area this creates a signal to others that the area is open for use.

Not all traveled ways are open to the public. Some forest roads are gated or blocked by obstacles such as boulders, logs, or dirt piles. As a general rule, if a route is not designated "open" by public notice (or you aren't sure which road it is), stay on the safe side of the law and assume the route is closed for use.

Driving in wet areas is never acceptable, except for designated stream crossings on approved roads. Muddy, wet roads can be extremely susceptible to damage, and you are prohibited from damaging any roads or trails, 36 CFR 261.12 (c). If you come across any egregiously swollen stream crossings or other dangerous conditions, please report them to the appropriate ranger district.



Campfires

If you are planning on using campfires, stoves, lanterns, or bar-b-ques outside a campground or recreational vehicle (and even in some developed campgrounds), you will need to obtain a campfire permit.

The permit is free, valid for a full year from January 1 to December 31, and may be obtained in person from Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and CalFire offices, or online at www.readyforwildfire.org.

Your responsibilities for building and putting out your fire safely are explained on the campfire permit and must be adhered to, 36 CFR 261.52(k); PRC 4433.

Remember to drown, stir, feel to ensure a campfire is completely extinguished before leaving the site.

You are welcome to gather dead and downed wood to use for your campfire, but you may not take any home unless you obtain a fuelwood permit.