

CONSTRAINTS AND BENEFITS OF CHANGING THE DISTRIBUTION PROCESS FOR RECREATION SPECIAL USE PERMITS IN THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

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Abstract.—A significant policy change governing recreation Special Use Permits on U.S. Federal lands was implemented in October 2008. The changes may have a major impact on current and potential recreation users, members of local communities, and existing outfitter/guide services. This paper presents findings from interviews with permit distribution supervisors about changes in the permit allocation process. This research is one part of a larger project focused on developing a universal but flexible framework by which permit distribution officials can allocate and monitor recreation Special Use Permits.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The regulation of use has been a concern since the first public lands were created in the United States, and it continues to be a constant issue for land managers today. Visitor use has many subcategories, such as individual versus group use, and monitoring efforts also focus on the people or services that bring people onto public lands. Federal regulations are in place for ecological management, but it is up to individual land managers to know the specific ecological and social carrying capacities of their area, and to develop a customized framework for managing and monitoring use (Holdgate 1984, Legore 1984, Watson et al. 2000, Manning and Lawson 2002, Collins and Brown 2007).

As of October 2008, new policies require changes to the recreational Special Use Permitting process that applies to outfitter and guiding services. These organizations, which bring groups of people onto publicly managed lands, hold one of two types of Special Use Permits (SUPs): priority or temporary. Priority permit holders are usually those whose business or service focuses and/or takes place almost exclusively on public lands. Priority use permits tend to have longevity and allow many consecutive days of use. For example, a whitewater rafting business with an equipment store and guiding service would be both an outfitter and guide service, and would need a priority use permit. Temporary permit holders have fewer days of use, usually only for a specified time period (Brown 2008). Recreation events, such as bike races or Boy Scout camps, would receive a temporary permit. Recent changes to the Special Use Permitting process will affect both types of permit holders.

Priority use permits will last for 5 years instead of 10; they will be monitored more strictly for quality of service and percentage of allotted days actually used. The main drawback for priority permit holders will be the loss of some flexibility about which days they can use the area. This change will have the biggest effect on priority outfitters/guides that operate during the shoulder season (between the peak and off-peak seasons) and depend on the flexibility of use days when the weather and the number of users (clients) fluctuate considerably. Temporary use permit holders will also be strongly affected since the first step of the changes is to cancel all existing temporary permits. Temporary permits will then be allotted on a first-come, first-served basis from a *temporary use pool*. Therefore, temporary users that want to request many use days will have an incentive to apply for a priority use permit, and other temporary users will have to compete against each other for use days. This process gives everyone a fair chance at use access and increases overall opportunities to provide a greater variety of activities. In addition to affecting permit holders, these changes will affect members of the general public who use these resources and resource services.

The primary objective of the proposed policy changes is to increase the efficiency of the existing permit distribution processes to improve the quality and variety of services that permit holders provide. Permitting officials plan to achieve greater variety by developing a temporary use permit allocation process that facilitates greater outfitting/guiding participation by young people and educational or religious groups. Permitting officials also intend to institute policies for allocating priority use permits that are based on performance, evaluations, and type of use (Brown 2008). The first step in overhauling the Special Use Permit allocation system is to develop better procedures for inventorying and monitoring permit holders.

This study focuses on developing a systematic approach to allocating SUPs, but individual permit officials and land managers can take their own preliminary steps to assess their sites' recreation supply and demand. Irland (1979) asserts, "Free availability of wilderness recreation has led to an excess of demand over supply, in effect changing the quality of the service provided." Recreation research provides various methodologies for monitoring different aspects of use (demand) (O'Riordon and Sewell 1981, Holdgate 1984). Individual permit sites can also create an inventory of their resources (supply). They can determine ecological and social carrying capacities and conduct needs assessments to analyze supply versus demand. Data for these inventories have already been collected in some areas over the last several years using survey instruments. These inventories can also draw upon existing recreation use data from the National Visitor Use Monitoring process (NVUM). Analysis of NVUM data can help predict how changes to the Special Use Permitting process will affect outfitter guides and end users at individual sites.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Past Studies Concerning Special Use Permit Distribution

Fairfax and Ingram (1981), McNeely and Thorsell (1992), and Watson et al. (2000) conducted site-specific and/or event-specific studies related to the Recreation Special Use Permit distribution process. However, research related to developing a universal,

systematic approach to permit allocation has been strictly observational. This study is trying to determine the factors that would allow a permitting allocation and management framework to be both effective and versatile.

2.2 The Necessity, Constraints, and Benefits of a Permit System for Managers

As explained in the introduction, it is the land manager's job to balance supply and demand through the permitting process by understanding the ecological capacity of the resources and the demand for resource access and use by both permit holders and the public. As the human population has increased, the number of visitors to protected areas has continued to rise (Holdgate 1984, IUCN 1984, Watson et al. 2000, Collins and Brown 2007). Because this increase will inevitably affect most public lands, strategic partnerships would be helpful across the public forest system (Irland 1979). A good use-regulation system also has a social impact as far as the visitor *experience* is concerned. Therefore, it is important to understand an area's social carrying capacity (Manning and Lawson 2002).

3.0 METHODS

3.1 Study Site

This study was conducted over the telephone with people in charge of Special Use Permits on National Forests in Oregon, Washington, and Colorado (Forest Service Regions 6 and 2).

3.2 Procedures

The authors first wanted to understand current permitting procedures on public lands by collecting information from permitting officials and land managers. Before questioning the managers, we developed the following questions and researched them as a precursor to guide the study:

- RQ1: Why is a system of use regulation necessary on public land?
- RQ2: Why is a permit process beneficial to managers?
- RQ3: What are the main changes to the Federal Register?
- RQ4: What are the proposed goals of the changes?

RQ5: Who else does the management of an area need to keep in mind about how the various changes will affect them?

RQ6: What initial steps of action are needed?

We then formulated 12 open-ended questions and interviewed 20 people in charge of recreational Special Use Permit distribution (100-percent response rate). Interviewees' responses were typed into document form and then compared and contrasted as we looked for similar constraints or opinions. The goal was to identify key personnel in the permitting process and variation in the Special Use Permit distribution process, and to gain a better understanding of the realities of permit distribution.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following are the phone interview questions and a summary of the responses.

Question 1. Who handles the distribution of recreation special use permits for this forest?

Realty Specialists, Special Use Coordinators, Forest Supervisors, and Forest Technicians. Titles varied by forest size and visitation rates. For example, in smaller areas with less visitation, permit distribution would be a duty assigned under another job title, rather than a job in itself.

Question 2. What activities or events are managed under the Recreation-Specific Special Use Permitting process?

Outfitters (any kind of recreation retail or supply), Guides (personal, nonprofit, and commercial), Recreation Events, Recreation Residences, and Concessions (campgrounds).

Question 3. How many special use permits does your forest manage per year?

Varies by forest, ranging from 90 to 390 recreation-specific SUPs. The percentage of SUPs that were recreation-specific out of the total number of SUPs varied by the area as well, and seemed to have more to do with the visitation rate than with the size of the area.

Question 4. Has that number changed in the past few years, and why?

About half of the managers responded, "Yes, the number of SUPs went up." There was no pattern to the amount of the increase, but no dramatic increases were reported. The other half of the managers reported that the number of permits had decreased slightly or stayed the same.

Question 5. Does your forest use any other processes, such as concessions or cooperative agreements, to manage various uses of the forest?

Most respondents said that they used campground concessions. Most areas, even with multiple camping sites, seemed to have all sites under one concession permit.

Question 6. Are there any limits on the numbers of special use permits issued?

The answers varied by forest for numerous reasons. The majority said that there were limits because capacity either had been reached or in some cases had been breached for a while. Carrying capacity in some areas had not yet been measured and no permits were being distributed for those areas.

Question 7. Are there limits on the numbers of users allowed under any of your special use permits (e.g., a limited number of rafters per day)?

All managers with wilderness areas reported adhering to federal regulations regarding group size in wilderness areas. Most water recreation areas limited the number of rafts per day. Some bigger areas reported setting limits on holidays and at peak-season times.

Question 8. Have requests for special use permits been denied in your forest?

Nearly all managers said yes. The main reasons given were to preserve habitat and to avoid activities that could be executed on private land. All managers reported using a screening process to filter out the most inappropriate requests before they had to deny them.

Question 9. Are you experiencing any problems administering your special use permit program?

All said yes. Most, if not all, managers stated that their main obstacles were lack of time, lack of personnel, and lack of funds and resources.

Question 10. Do you believe that SUPs are distributed fairly on your forest?

Most said something like “as well as they can be” or “better than they used to be.” Most areas, if not all, would benefit from a needs assessment or capacity analysis in at least one section of the forest or with regards to specific resources to properly allocate the permits.

Question 11. How well do you believe your forest’s existing SUP process meets the needs of your users (and potential users)?

Most managers said “well.” Where there is unmet demand for resource access or use, the excess demand comes from the outfitters and guides, not from the general public.

Question 12. Are you aware of the changes in the SUP process that were outlined in the latest Federal Register? How do you feel about them?

All said yes. Most agreed that the proposed changes would eventually be helpful but were dreading the amount of work (with already limited resources) it will take to rewrite their processes and incorporate the changes.

In summary, there is some variation in how permits are allocated and distributed on different forests and there are some constraints to implementing changes in the process from forest to forest. The consensus seems to be that the personnel in charge of distributing permits are already consumed by their daily duties and would need help (in the form of more funds or hands) to implement the proposed changes—even if the goal of the changes is to maximize efficiency to create more time and funds.

According to Harrison and colleagues (1982), the continued expansion of protected areas will require a clear set of goals and an “increased investment in human resources, in the development of enterprises . . . , in education, and in research aimed at producing improved means of management.” This ‘investment’ addresses the collective management concern of being asked to do more with an already insufficient supply of time and

personnel, but “such an investment would be well repaid by human societies living in a better balance with their environment” (Harrison et al. 1982).

5.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

An obvious limitation of this study is the one-sided approach created by concentrating on only the managers’ point of view. As stated previously, these changes will greatly affect outfitters/guides, visitors who use their services, and possibly other individual users sharing the area. Therefore, to best gauge the effects of use regulation and opinions on the proposed changes, similar research is needed to obtain feedback and opinions from these other concerned groups.

Another limitation is that the study was conducted in one specific corner of the United States. Although there is variation among the sizes and resource features of the National Forests in the study area, other forests may face different limitations, such as climate or cultural constraints.

Last, this is a preliminary study. Using information from the research about current permit distribution processes, future research should seek more specific information about potential or actual changes to the permit allocation process. Future research could also focus on the reasons or motivations for different management decisions related to permits.

6.0 NEXT STEPS

Management results and demographic information from the National Visitor Use Monitoring data will provide background information for a mail survey to assess the situation from the outfitters and guides’ responses. The research instrument will be revised and the same managers will be asked to participate in a follow-up study using the Delphi Method. Results of the continuous rounds of questionnaires required by the Delphi process, along with the research literature, will be analyzed to identify potential key factors in a more universal plan to regulate use.

7.0 CITATIONS

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