

**ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST
MARIENVILLE RANGER DISTRICT**

**DISTRICT RANGER WHITE PAPER ON
RECREATION FACILITIES ANALYSIS ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this white paper is to express my thoughts on the Action Recommendations made for recreation facilities on the Marienville Ranger District for the Recreation Facilities Analysis. As the Bradford and Marienville District Rangers went through this process it became apparent that the Ranking and Action steps were so process and template oriented that the thought-processes and intents of the Rangers were not at all apparent. It is my hope that this document will clarify how the Action Recommendations were made and the rationale I used in considering the future of these facilities on the District. Ranger Scardina has prepared a similar white paper for the Bradford District.

The Situation

The ability of the Allegheny National Forest to fund Operations & Maintenance (O&M) and Deferred Maintenance (DM) for existing recreation facilities has been on a decreasing trend for several years, and there is little to indicate that this will change in the near future. The District Rangers already make difficult choices on where to allocate our limited resources, and this has resulted in deferring maintenance required to keep facilities up to standard, reducing season and hours of operation and/or level of service, and fewer personnel on the ground. We have developed some simple tenets to guide management of the resources we have – 1) public health and safety, 2) clean facilities, and 3) service to and contact with the recreation public.

However, we have reached a point where the Deferred Maintenance on our facilities is compromising our ability to meet those tenets consistently across the ANF, and the cost of ongoing Operations and Maintenance are such that – except for fixing things when they breakdown and throwing the occasional coat of paint on our buildings – we won't be able to address the DM any time soon. This is not meant to be a bureaucratic plea for more public dollars – the recreation budget for the ANF has been relatively stable for the past ten years (overall, though, we have less now than we did then), but costs have increased and the buying power of that budget has been reduced appreciably. And it is evident from our occupancy data that the public is simply not using ANF facilities as much as they have in the past, and certainly not as much as they could. Our choices for the future include, among others, 1) keep spreading a thinner layer of budget over all of the facilities we have, at least until the DM reaches a point where we would have to close some of these facilities, 2) proactively close some facilities, reduce services at others, and create the budget flexibility to improve facilities at key locations, and/or 3) seek to develop private/public partnerships to enhance our ability to operate and maintain key recreation facilities. The ANF plays a critical role in the recreation economy of the four counties within which it is encompassed and the numerous communities which are within or encircle the ANF boundaries.

The Rationale

There are some unique characteristics that differentiate the recreation experience – and the management emphasis – that may be found on the Bradford and Marienville Ranger Districts. The Allegheny Reservoir is a dominant geographical and recreation feature on the Bradford District; and, even with the recommended reduction in services and facilities, management of the Reservoir will continue to emphasize developed recreation with full service campgrounds, day use areas, and comfort amenities (such as the marina, a visitor information station, water and waste-water facilities). The Bradford District also provides some of the more unique and popular geographical and natural features of the ANF, such as Buckaloons on the Allegheny River, Tionesta Overlook, the Tionesta National Scenic Area, the National Recreation Areas, Hickory Creek Wilderness, Minister Creek, and others.

The Marienville District is characterized by less emphasis on developed recreation and greater emphasis on motorized trails and dispersed camping (camping with no services and no fees at user-developed sites, characterized primarily by car camping at scattered locations across the District). As with Ranger Scardina, I relied on key focal points to guide my recommendations for managing the developed recreation on the Marienville Ranger District. These key points include:

- Reduce sites in close vicinity that provide similar services
 - Where private vendors provide similar services, the Forest Service does not need to duplicate these services or compete with the private provider.
- Make reductions where they would have a real effect on reducing our overall O&M and DM costs
 - Emphasize providing only basic services at developed recreation areas – the more traditional, rustic experience of National Forest recreation.
- Reduce services or eliminate sites with low occupancy levels
- Reduce the number of water and wastewater facilities to a level that could be properly operated and maintained with the current staffing and funding available
- Where the public has indicated a clear preference for some services that do not currently exist, we will consider providing some level of basic services

The Recommendations

The developed campgrounds on the Marienville Ranger District – Twin Lakes, Beaver Meadows, and Loleta – all operate well below capacity between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

- Loleta and Beaver Meadows are in relatively close proximity, with each about 6 miles in opposite directions from the center of Marienville. Yet, use figures show that, even in July, the busiest month of the season, all of the campers utilizing Beaver Meadows and Loleta could stay in Loleta Campground, and it would still only account for about 70% of capacity. This has

been the trend for several years, and would seem to indicate that one Forest Service campground in the vicinity of Marienville can more than meet the demand. Loleta, with its historic CCC-era buildings and weir dam, and its history as the “local pond” for Marienville residents, provides the more compelling case for retention. The lower loop at Loleta provides sites attractive to RV campers, while the upper loop provides the more primitive, well-spaced sites preferred by tent campers. The upper loop can provide an experience similar to that of Beaver Meadows. The recommendation here is to close the campground at Beaver Meadows (but retain the day use area with parking, picnic tables, vault toilet, and hiking trails); and keep the campground at Loleta, but phase out running water, showers, and flush toilets in favor of vault toilets and haul-your-own water. The services currently provided at Loleta are also offered at two privately-owned campgrounds closer to Marienville.

- Twin Lakes, with the full range of services for campers, averaged 44% of capacity between 2003 and 2006. This actually ranks as the 4th highest occupancy of the full service campgrounds on the ANF (behind Buckaloons, Dewdrop, and Kiasutha), but still raises the question of whether it is better for the ANF to struggle to maintain a number of campgrounds that operate at less than half of their capacity, or for the ANF to efficiently maintain fewer campgrounds that operate at a higher percentage of their capacity. Given the attraction of the Allegheny Reservoir as a more likely location for full service campgrounds, Twin Lakes become a candidate for a reduction of services. The recommendation here is to keep the campground at Twin Lakes, but phase out running water, showers, and flush toilets in favor of vault toilets and haul-your-own water. The services currently provided at Twil Lakes are also provided at a privately-owned campground in Lantz Corners, about 8 miles to the north, and the Forest Service campgrounds on the Allegheny Reservoir (the closest of which is newly refurbished Red Bridge campground, about 12 miles to the north).

In the case of both Loleta and Twin Lakes, with services reduced, a case could be made in the future for reducing the price of camping, and possibly eliminating day-use fees for non-campers. Since both of these sites are favored local swimming and recreation sites (Loleta for Marienville and Twin Lakes for Wilcox and Kane), it is possible the removal of a day-use fee would actually increase use of these sites by local residents. In addition, if the retention of current services at these sites is favored by the recreation public, then another possibility is to seek investment in upgrading, operating and maintaining these facilities by a private or public partner to ease the financial burden on the ANF recreation budget.

Dispersed camping seems much more popular on the Marienville Ranger District than developed camping, with local residents as well as frequent return visitors from Pittsburgh, Butler, Erie, and locations in Ohio. At developed campgrounds, you can camp only at the developed sites, and you generally pay a fee or have some kind of associated services. With dispersed camping, you can camp anywhere on the National Forest (except where camping is prohibited), at no cost. There are different rules that apply to dispersed camping and generally fewer restrictions. Along the Clarion River, where the dispersed camping is restricted to designated sites only, there is rarely an open site on weekends between July 1 and Labor Day, and often more than half the sites are occupied on weekends during the shoulder season of April-June and September-November. Folks who prefer dispersed camping often prefer sites near water, and some of the streams on the Marienville District that experience high numbers of dispersed campers during the summer

include the west and east branches of Tionesta Creek, Spring Creek, Salmon Creek, Millstone Creek, Big Mill Creek, Bear Creek, and Bloody Run. This is also a preferred mode of camping for folks who want to camp adjacent and with direct access to the ATV trails – with popular camping spots at the FR 401 stone pit, FR 395, maple Run, and scattered locations along the trails. And we also see this mode of camping with folks who use the horse trails – with popular camping spots at the FR 403 and 130 stone pits.

These trends in dispersed and developed camping indicate a need for fewer developed sites offering fewer services, and greater emphasis on managing dispersed camping. To effect the latter, this may mean restricting dispersed camping along streams to designated sites only, and then improving the access and erosion controls on those sites so that camping does not continue to diminish the water quality that draws the campers in the first place. It may also mean more Forest Service patrols to ensure that dispersed campers understand and adhere to some very basic rules of camping on the ANF – *keep fires in fire rings and make sure the fires are out when they leave, manage human waste at the campsite, keep pets under control, and collect their garbage and take it all the way home or to a collection facility that will accept it.*

The chart on the following pages highlights the difficult choices discussed above regarding developed campgrounds, as well as recommendations for the other developed sites on the Marienville Ranger District, including the day use areas, trailhead, boat launches, and other non-fee sites. As with Ranger Scardina, I believe these choices will allow us to focus more dollars on priority sites and help ensure we have better maintained facilities and the opportunity to improve services in the future that will meet the wants and needs of our visitors. I, too, would rather move in this direction than continue to stretch our financial resources to the point where we have poorly maintained facilities, and inability to properly manage our water and wastewater systems and a lack of updated services at our sites.

Marienville District Recreation Facilities Action Recommendations

| Recreation Facility | Recommendation | Primary Rationale | Ranger Thoughts |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beaver Meadows Campground and Recreation Area | Close and decommission campground, recycle toilet buildings and gravel to other recreation areas (Marienville ATV Trailhead, FR 395 Trailhead and/or Forest County Allegheny River Boat Landing). Keep and maintain Day Use Recreation Area (parking lot, toilet building, picnic tables, boat launch). | Very low occupancy, camping experience can be provided elsewhere on ANF, Savings in DM and O&M. | A difficult recommendation, since Beaver Meadows provides the classic Forest Service front country camping experience – pleasant setting, sheltered sites, trails, surface water, hardened camping surface, picnic table, fire ring, drinking water, and vault toilet. Considered closing the day use area and just one loop of the campground; however, this is a case of the Forest Service providing what it traditionally provides, but the public seemingly wants less and less. Proximity to Marienville is key factor in keeping the day use area as it provides a local attraction and ANF connection for visitors to that community. |
| Brush Hollow Trailhead | No Change | Minimal O&M and DM costs | This remains a popular trail system, and this trailhead the primary access point. Amenities include the parking area and vault toilet. Proximity to Ridgway makes this a strong local attraction and ANF connection for visitors to that community. |
| Buzzard Swamp FR 157 Trailhead | Reduce parking area by 61 Persons at One Time (PAOTS) | Minimal O&M and DM costs | A popular area for hunting, fishing, hiking, birding, and |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| | | | <p>wildlife viewing. Amenities include the parking area and vault toilet. There are other parking areas and access points, but they do not have any other amenities. This parking area has considerably larger capacity than is necessary; part of the lot could be reclaimed. Proximity to Marienville makes this a strong local attraction and ANF connection for visitors to that community, but it is also a strong draw for the ANF as a whole. Site of annual Forest County Youth Field Day.</p> |
| <p>Irwin Run Canoe Launch on the Clarion River</p> | <p>Increase parking area by 22 Persons at One Time (PAOTS), add as many as two designated boat launch areas along the Clarion River</p> | <p>Low O&M costs, Moderate DM costs.</p> | <p>This is the only designated Forest Service boat launch on the Clarion River, which is the most popular recreation resource on the Marienville District from May to September. Irwin Run, which also includes a dispersed campsite, vault toilet, and river map kiosk is the end point of the scenic portion of the Clarion River and a key exit point for boaters floating from Ridgway, Portland Mills and/or Arroyo. On most weekends in May, June and July, this parking area is full, with overflow vehicles parked along the state road. Potential for</p> |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|---|
| | | | multiple partners to work to improve and manage this site. |
| Kelly Pines Campground | No Change | Moderate O&M costs, Low DM costs | Geared primarily to horse users, this no-fee camping area meets a specific need, and is tied to the planned development of a 40-mile horse trail. Amenities are limited and include covered tie stalls, hardened sites, and vault toilet. This camping experience is not provided elsewhere in this portion of the Marienville District, either by the ANF or private vendors. With some added amenities, this could become a fee site in the future. |
| Laurel Mill Trailhead | Reduce parking area by 23 Persons at One Time (PAOTS), paint warming hut, repair or replace kiosk. | Low O&M costs, Moderate DM costs | The only groomed cross-country ski trails on the Marienville District. Amenities include warming hut, vault toilet, and kiosk. Trailhead and trail system are maintained through a public-private partnership. This parking area has more capacity than is necessary; part of the lot could be reclaimed. Proximity to Ridgway makes this a strong local attraction and ANF connection for visitors to that community. |
| Little Drummer Trailhead | Repair map box, repair or replace kiosk. | Low O&M and DM costs | Interpretive Trail is in disrepair and will need attention. The trailhead amenities include |

| | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | | | parking area, vault toilet and kiosk. This site has great potential, when combined with other sites along the Clarion River corridor, as destination for school and family groups seeking self-guided interpretive experience. Potential for public/private partnership to improve and maintain. |
| Loleta Campground and Recreation Area | Decommission drinking water and waste-water treatment systems. | Low occupancy, Amenities provided by local private vendors, High O&M and DM costs | Another tough recommendation. Loleta day use area was once the unofficial “park” for the Marienville community; but this use has diminished in recent years – perhaps due in part to day use fees. Removing water faucets, flush toilets, and showers could be grounds to drop the fee. Private vendors elsewhere along Loleta Road provide all of these amenities. Camping would be relatively unchanged – with the lower loop providing slots for RVs in close proximity to state road, the upper loop providing a more remote experience that appeals more to tent campers, and the group sites continuing to accommodate larger groups. |
| Marienville ATV Trail – Main Trailhead | New ADA standard vault toilet building (possibly relocate one of the decommissioned toilet | Low O&M and Moderate DM costs | High use site when ATV trail is open. Amenities include parking area, vault toilet, |

| | | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| | buildings from Beaver Meadows) | | loading ramp, and information kiosk. Key access point to both Marienville ATV and Bike Trails. |
| Marienville ATV Trail - FR 395 Trailhead | New ADA standard vault toilet building (possibly relocate one of the decommissioned toilet buildings from Beaver Meadows) | Low O&M costs and Moderate DM costs | High use site during holiday weekends when ATV trail is open. Amenities include parking area, vault toilet, information kiosk, and dispersed camping. |
| Red Mill Camping Area | No Change | Low O&M and DM costs | Popular dispersed camping site, particularly with local residents from Ridgway and St. Marys. Amenities include parking area, delineated campsites, and vault toilet. This site fills a need in this area of the District, particularly in providing a toilet in an area that gets a lot of dispersed camping along Big Mill Creek. |
| Timberline ATV Trail – Buehlers Corners Trailhead | No Change | Low O&M and DM costs | Primarily a parking area. Only other amenities are information kiosk and loading ramp. Southern most access to ATV trail system, and closest to Ridgway. District typically provides a port-a-potty at the play pit located off of FR 335, about 5 miles north of this trailhead. |
| Timberline ATV Trail – Pigs Ear Trailhead | No Change | Low O&M and DM costs | Primarily a parking area. Only other amenities are information kiosk and loading ramp. Provides access to both |

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| | | | <p>Marienville and Timberline ATV trails. Would be a good location for a vault toilet, but site is an issue due to wetlands and heritage resources. District typically provides a port-a-potty during the summer season at the nearby 401 pit, where dispersed camping is popular.</p> |
| <p>Timberline ATV Trail – Main Trailhead and Camping Area</p> | <p>No change.</p> | <p>Low O&M and DM costs</p> | <p>Both a parking area and a no-fee camping area. Amenities include parking loading ramp, information kiosk, delineated camping sites, and vault toilet. Currently only one private vendor is providing a full-service campground with direct access to the ATV trail system. This site could be expanded into a developed fee-site campground in the future, with additional camping sites, fire rings, picnic tables, and possibly other amenities specific to ATV use. Many ATV users on multiple-day stays seek camping sites with direct access to the trail system. Currently, only dispersed camping, and the minimum amenities provided at this site, are available on National Forest land.</p> |
| <p>Tionesta Reservoir Boat-To Campground</p> | <p>Transfer to Army Corps of</p> | <p>Low occupancy, access for</p> | <p>Difficult for the Forest Service to manage, and occupancy is</p> |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | Engineers or Decommission. | operations and maintenance is difficult and requires special equipment, otherwise Low O&M and DM costs | low – particularly with full service camping, day use and boat launch facilities provided by the Army Corps of Engineers at the dam and at Kellettsville. Recommendation is for the Forest Service to either turn this site over to the Army Corps, or decommission and reclaim this site. |
| Twin Lakes Campground and Recreation Area | Decommission the water and wastewater systems. Remove associated buildings. | High O&M and DM costs | Another difficult recommendation. This recreation area is popular with local residents in Kane and Wilcox, particularly for fishing and swimming in the lake. However, like Loleta, this popularity may have diminished a bit since the day use fee was instituted. Reducing the services available at this site affects convenience, but retains the elements that make this site attractive to local and non-local alike, and could be grounds to drop the fee. The campground may hold less appeal for many visitors because of diminished services; but the cost of maintaining the current level of services simply cannot be sustained with the current occupancy. And the majority of the O&M and deferred maintenance is related |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| | | | to the water and waste-water systems. Full service camping is available north of Kane at Red Bridge CG, and through local private vendors in Sheffield and Lantz Corners. |
|--|--|--|---|

The Next Steps

The shift of recreation management on the Marienville District to focus more on dispersed camping and day use, with reduced services in developed areas, would occur over several years and could involve adding limited services where none currently exist.

Developed Camping: If the recommendation to close and decommission the campground at Beaver Meadows is accepted, then this could occur as early as 2009, with the vault toilets from this facility being moved to other locations where use is higher or increasing, or the need is growing – such as Marienville ATV Trailhead, Tionesta Boat Launch (Forest County facility), or the FR 395 ATV Trailhead. The removal of the water and waste-water systems at Loleta and Twin Lakes may occur over a much longer time frame (4-5 years), as the existing systems deteriorate to the point where further maintenance would become too costly or impractical without replacing the systems. At this time, these systems would be decommissioned, and the level of service reduced at these sites. I would also expect a concurrent reduction in price for camping, and/or removal of day use fees at these sites. This transition may occur sooner at Twin Lakes, than at Loleta. The waste-water system at Twin Lakes is already running on only one pump – when this pump fails to the point it needs to be replaced, this would signal the time for transition to the reduced services. Loleta operates on a mound system for waste-water treatment, so this transition would be based more on the need to repair or replace the appurtenances, such as showers, toilets, sinks, etc.

In addition to the fee camping sites, the two no-fee sites at Kelly Pines and the Timberline ATV Trailhead could be upgraded to provide more – but still limited – services and made into fee sites. In either case, water would not be provided, and only vault toilets would be maintained at these sites. But amenities such as picnic tables and fire rings could be added, in addition to hardened camping sites. Each campground would continue to have additional amenities specific to the user emphasis – loading ramps at the ATV site, and stalls and tie racks at the horse site.

Clarion River: The District will continue to assess and move forward with steps to manage dispersed recreation along the Clarion River. The ANF has developed strong partnerships with local government to devise a strategy to implement some of the recommendations of the 2007 PA DCNR Clarion River Recreation Assessment for managing existing recreation activity along the river. For the ANF, this strategy includes consideration of camping clusters in certain locations along River Road, additional boat launch areas, providing vault toilets for sanitary disposal of human waste, and restoration of eroded sections of the river bank. And the District will continue to emphasize forest protection patrols along River Road.

Allegheny River: The District has no plans for enhanced recreation management along the Allegheny River, but will continue to assess the need for such activity in the future. The emphasis will be more on river health, with proposals in the future likely to focus on control of non-native invasive species and restoration of eroded banks along the river. The District is working with Forest County to develop options for placing a vault toilet at Tionesta boat launch. Management of human waste by the recreation public on the river is a concern, and this is a partnership that can help address that concern.

ATV Trailheads: The first step in closing the Beaver Meadows campground could be the relocation of the universally accessible vault toilets from the campground to the FR 395 ATV Trailhead, the Marienville ATV Trailhead, and/or the Tionesta Boat Launch mentioned above. The Marienville and Timberline ATV Trails continue to be the most heavily used trails – motorized or non-motorized – on the District and upgraded facilities are necessary. The District will continue to assess use and the need for facilities and/or services to support that use.

/s/ Robert T. Fallon

June 20, 2008

ROBERT T. FALLON
District Ranger
Marienville Ranger District

DATE