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To USFS

Comment: SNF Updated Forest Plan

Spirit of the Wilderness Outfitter & Retail Store services wilderness travelers in the BWCAW, Ontario Quetico Park as well as visitors to the greater Ely MN area. As a cooperator with the USFS we take seriously our role in protecting the SNF, educating our guests and limiting our impact on the environment.

We encourage the USFS to consider the following points:

Access:

Traveling the BWCAW can be an adventure of a lifetime for numerous Minnesotans and visitors from across the United States as well as internationally. We encourage the USFS to maintain access to the SNF and specifically the BWCAW by not reducing the number of entry point permits.

Entry point permits that were removed 2 years ago due to visitor impact on portages and campsites. Permits should be reinstated when the forest improves. We recognize improvement may take a number of years.

Permit online process:

Reserving entry point permits for the period May 1-September 30 starting the last Wednesday of January each year has been a race of who can navigate the process the fastest. We request the USFA make changes in the online process to allow a broader opportunity for visitors and outfitters to reserve permits. A revised process has been submitted to the USFS in 2023. It was recommended a "rolling process " be instituted dividing reserving permits into 2 periods; May 1- June 30 (reservation process opens last Wednesday of January) and July 1- September 30 (reservation process opens March 1). This will take the pressure off of reserving entry permits all on one day, reserving more than they can use in without knowing which dates their employers allow them time off.

A second improvement that could be instituted well before the 2025 reservation process is to limit the number of permit reservations that can be made at one time to 3. Currently, an individual can reserve a permit then move onto adding additional permits up to 7 total without leaving the Recreation.gov website and subsequently autofill their contact and credit card information.

This simple change would allow time for other people to make reservation(s) while the those wanting to add more reservations need to sign into REcreation.gov website once again.

Motorboat usage

Shuttling wilderness travelers by towboat or water taxis service should be preserved. This allows more access to people with disabilities, dispersing visitors deeper into the wilderness and provides less crowding on lakes currently serviced by towboats. The use of towboats is critical to ensuring all can experience the BWCAW.

Day use and overnight use of motorboat permits help individuals to experience the BWCAW for fishing and getting further into the BWCAW. Use of these types of permits should be continued as it offers the additional opportunity for visitors to experience the BWCAW. Keeping the current designation on which lakes motorboats are allowed on should be maintained.

Safety

Towboats and other motorboats also provide for situations where search and rescue situations arise. This allows 1st responders to locate individuals in distress and provide necessary support and evacuations as needed. It becomes a safety issue and provide peace of mind to wilderness travelers know support will be available in time of need.

Economic impact

The effect of reducing motorboat usage on currently designated selective lakes will have a negative economic impact on the business and communities in the area. This includes guide services, resorts, outfitters, campgrounds, restaurants, retail stores, motels/hotels, fuel stations, employees working at these establishments and more.

We welcome the opportunity to submit comments and request they are seriously considered. I am available to further discuss in more detail the issues discussed above.