

## MY LETTER

Gloria Nielsen  
District Ranger Talladega National Forest  
1001 North Street  
Talladega, AL 35160

The Locust Fork News-Journal Editorial Board, representing about a half a million readers every month, hereby protests your short sighted and reactionary decision to close the Lake Chinnabee Campground in the Talladega National Forest without advance public comment or a formal public hearing.

This beautiful campground is one of the few primitive campgrounds in the state without street lights and other accouterments of development where citizens can enjoy nature and the outdoors away from modern civilization. To close it and deny public access is a violation of your federal charter and the public trust placed in you by the citizens of Alabama.

You claim in your limited public notice of closure that you "...now have better data on the flood susceptibility of the camping area based on mapping by URS Corporation," yet the public has not had an opportunity to review this data since it has not been released to the media, the press or the public.

"Day use recreation poses a much lower risk from flash flooding than overnight camping," you claim, without providing a single shred of proof that this campground has ever flooded before May 18, 2013, which would indicate a 50 or 100 year flood event, not uncommon in national forests, parks and campgrounds all over the continental United States.

Officers in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, for example,

routinely close roads and campgrounds during winter and when weather events like snow occur, and you could do the same when heavy rains are forecast. People drown in rivers in national forests all over the country every year. They get lost in the woods and fall off of cliffs. They burn themselves, are exposed to poison oak and get bitten by mosquitoes and stung by bees. Should we close off all access to nature because of a little danger?

We think not.

This is no reason to close national forests or areas within them, including campgrounds. People who typically take advantage of these areas for recreation are aware of the risks. Life does not come without risk, nor does camping by a lake in a national forest.

In your notice, you cite three main reasons to change the area to day use only. You say, “most people are awake and aware of their surroundings when enjoying recreation areas during the daylight hours, and they tend to have a much higher level of awareness of changing weather conditions and rising water.”

Two, you say, it is easier and safer for people to move to higher ground during daylight hours. And three, the heavy rains that precede flash flood events typically discourage day use activities, making it less likely that the areas will be crowded should a flood occur.

This may be true, but it is not conclusive. People who camp for recreation have easy access to data on weather these days, and can access weather reports on portable, battery operated radios even where power and Internet access are not available. It is possible to obtain an Internet connection and check the weather on any smart phone these days, even in high points in the national forest.

You claim closing the campground and opening it for Day Use only reduces the number of people at risk and also facilitates any evacuations or other emergency responses that may be necessary, yet even your own experience proves that you have access to a crack team of emergency rescue personnel with the Clay County Rescue Squad, which helped evacuate campers during the flood event in May. There were no injuries and everybody who needed to get out did so safely. So even in a 100-year flood event, the danger was minimal.

You claim to have excluded group camping by reservation, installing a flood warning system or constructing a new campground at a higher elevation, but surely there are other easy and inexpensive safety measures that could be made, including raising the level of the road by the boat launch or enhancing the drainage capability of the spillway that already exists.

You claim that “because it is not possible to eliminate the high risk of harm to the public and their property should a flash flood occur,” and say in your notice that, “During a flood event, the campground access road becomes impassible. This prohibits visitors from safely evacuating the campground and limits access to emergency personnel entering the camping area. The terrain of the area makes the feasibility of constructing a new access road difficult and cost prohibitive.”

You fail to mention that the road does not have a storm drainage system that is up to specifications of the state and county where the campground lies. Perhaps the federal government should be required to install such a storm drainage system by local governments, whether the area is for day use or camping.

Your last objection is to a flood warning system, which you claim is “not a viable approach to alleviate the risk of flash flooding since

they could fail at critical times.”

That is an utterly ridiculous and false statement.

There are very simple and inexpensive ways these days of being warned of high water, including routine monitoring of the weather by forest rangers who make routine rounds of the area already. Could they not act as other rangers do in national forests all over the country and warn people when significant rain events are forecast? In the even of such a forecast, the campground could be evacuated and the road closed within a matter of minutes.

You complain about potential costs and the practicality of some of these measures, and say you are “focusing allocated funds to maintain existing facilities.” Yet you lost an untold number of dollars this fall alone when you had the campground totally closed to camping or day use during the peak autumn color season, at a time of peak tourism and recreational use. You are losing money by closing the campground, not saving money.

You say that “due to the minor structural changes needed to convert to day use only, the Forest Service anticipate that the project will be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS),” yet we argue with that conclusion and our attorneys are being advised to consider filing an intent to sue in the event the campground is permanently closed.

Furthermore, you recently issued a certified citation to a member of the press for visiting the area and promoting it, even though you also posted “Walk In Use Invited” signs at the entrance road to the campground. There were many other people using the area at that time, including the hikers participating in the Pinhoti 100 hiking race, occurring through the area on the day this reporter was visiting to

obtain photos of the area. We had requested photos of damage to the area, which only provided after closing the campground for six months and after we broke the story.

We would like to see the campground remain open and see a further analysis conducted on how better to utilize taxpayer resources to provide the most public access possible in the peoples' forest. That is your charge.

Be forewarned that if this area is ever again considered for natural gas drilling and fracking, we will lodge strong objections to that proposed use. That is and will remain our strong editorial policy.

cc: Steve Lohr, Forest Supervisor  
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