

Life *in the* Valley

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ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Three Pools Recreation Site is seen on a fairly slow day in summer. Under new proposed rules, alcohol would be banned at the site.

Eight things to know about proposed recreation rules

Forest Service aims to address crowding, drunken behavior

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U.S. Forest Service officials announced the first step toward addressing overcrowding and drunken behavior at some of Oregon's most iconic outdoor places.

Officials laid out a series of new rules and regulations for Three Pools Recreation Site, Opal Creek Trail, Elk Lake and Breitenbush River east of Salem.

The goal is to provide relief for places impacted by large crowds, drunken behavior and damage to the natural environment. Now they want the public's input.

"We're trying the least-restrictive management techniques to start," said Josh Weathers, developed recreation manager for Willamette National Forest. "We still want people to come up and enjoy these places, but we want to encourage more responsible use and stop places from being 'loved to death.'"

A story on the proposed rules appeared on the front page of the Statesman Journal's March 28 edition, but many readers had questions about the details and queries such as "who will enforce these rules?" and "why is my favorite place suddenly so crowded?"

Here are a few answers.

What are the rules, in a nutshell?

Three Pools: Alcohol would be banned and only people parking in the site's 94-space lot would be allowed into the popular swimming holes northeast of Mehama.

Opal Creek Trail: Campfires would be banned at most backpacking campsites along Opal Creek Trail, near Jawbone Flats and up Kopetski Trail. Parking would be limited to a quarter mile down Forest Service Road 2209 from the Opal Creek Gate Trailhead.

Elk Lake, Breitenbush River, French Creek, Blowout Creek: Dispersed camping — user-created sites not part of an official campground — would be illegal for larger area along roads that access these waterbodies.

Why these type of rules?

The Forest Service is basically looking for a middle way to deal with overuse and bad behavior.

Instead of limiting crowds with a permit system — or capping the number of visitors allowed — they propose limiting parking spaces. They hope it achieves

the same goal.

The ban on alcohol has worked well at other popular sites, such as Terwilliger Hot Springs and the Clackamas River corridor, Weathers said.

Getting rid of about 50 to 60 of the most problematic dispersed campsites — especially in popular recreation corridors like Breitenbush River near Detroit — helps encourage day use while still leaving open vast swaths of Willamette National Forest for dispersed camping, Weathers said.

What would the penalty of breaking the rules be?

Violating the alcohol ban: \$200
Violating the campfire ban: \$250
Violating dispersed camping ban: \$100
Violating parking rules: \$50
Each fine would also carry a \$35 processing fee.

Who would enforce the rules?

Willamette National Forest has 10 rangers who can issue citations and who are not armed. It has two officers who are armed and are trained for more confrontational situations.

The Forest Service also has relationships with deputies from the Marion County Sheriff's Office who can assist, especially in the Three Pools and Opal Creek area.

"We have a deputy that patrols the Little North Santiam canyon, and if they called for help, we would assist the best we were able," said Lt. Chris Baldrige of the Marion County Sheriff's Office. "We also have intergovernmental agreements where we're able to enforce the rules of a (federal) agency. In this case, we would take a look at it if they proposed it."

Weathers said the Forest Service would seek that type of intergovernmental agreement if the rules are approved. Meaning, there's a chance county deputies could enforce Forest Service rules.

How can I make my voice heard?

You can make a comment that the Forest Service will consider in shaping these rules at <https://cara.ecosystemmanagement.org/Public/CommentInput?project=51339>. The deadline for making a comment is April 14.

If approved, when would these new rules go into effect?



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Opal Creek Trail passes Jawbones Flats, which was built in the 1930s and was an old mining town. Under new proposed rules, campfires would be banned at most backpacking campsites along Opal Creek Trail, near Jawbone Flats and up Kopetski Trail.

They would be in place this summer, likely beginning Memorial Day — May 29. A decision is likely by May 1.

How bad is the problem?

That depends on how you view it. In winter, and during much of late autumn and spring, crowds are sparse.

During the height of summer, from mid-June to mid-August, it's a different story. Hot summer days bring hundreds of people to Three Pools, a relatively small area. Opal Creek has the same problem. Both sites have seen drug use, heavy drinking and irresponsible camping, officials said.

The main problem at dispersed campsites along Breitenbush and the other rivers and creeks is human waste washing into streams and damage to vegetation. Those sites also discourage day-use visitors, Weathers said.

"As our beautiful forest becomes more popular, we find there are a few locations that are not able to withstand the impacts from visitors," District Ranger Grady McMahan said. "In addition to litter and human waste, irresponsible drinking is a problem at Three Pools Day Use Area, specifically. We want all people to feel welcome to come enjoy their forest; that means asking everyone to behave considerately of others and the land."

What's causing the increase in visitors?

Population growth in the Willamette Valley, unusually hot summers and lots of attention from social media and traditional media outlets have created a perfect storm for places like Three Pools and Opal Creek.

Weathers said visitors frequently travel from Portland's metro area to visit Three Pools and Opal Creek, inspired by "best swimming holes" lists posted by media companies and spread through social media. The social media website Instagram, in particular, has driven people to the Little North Fork canyon seeking pictures to post.

The Statesman Journal, along with The Oregonian, Willamette Week, Outdoor Project, OnlyInYourState.com and countless magazines and websites have all featured stories about recreating at Three Pools and Opal Creek. The increase in visitors to outdoor destinations, in Oregon and the West, has been a well-documented trend spanning state parks, national parks and federal lands.

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