Enders, Swanson and Rock Creek SRAs would be affected by proposed cuts

By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Unbeknownst to many, the level of services at three local state recreation areas (SRA) could be reduced significantly after the July 4th holiday this summer.

If the Game & Parks Commission (GPC) doesn't receive its full funding request from the Nebraska Legislature next month, services will be reduced at Enders, Swanson and Rock Creek SRAs.

These three will be among a number of SRAs around the state where services will be reduced.

Roger Kuhn, assistant director for GPC, said Tuesday state funding levels will determine what actions the GPC will take.

If GPC's full budget request is filled, Kuhn said the entire park system will operate at status quo.

However, "that doesn't look too promising right now," Kuhn said.

Kuhn explained GPC receives 25 percent of its funding for operations from the state's general fund appropriated by the Legislature.

The remainder comes from user fees, with park permits generating the largest amount of that revenue.

Kuhn said GPC asked the Legislature to allow them to raise the cost of a park permit from $20 up to $25 as needed.

However, state senators killed the bill.

Sen. Mark Christensen of Imperial said he voted for the increase because "I know who's going to lose" if it isn't passed.

With that revenue increase squashed, Kuhn said they have to rely on the Legislature to fully fund them.

If they don't, then GPC has to be prepared to make cuts accordingly, he said.

He said the agency never fully recovered after taking a 17 percent cut in 2002-2003.

With the agency's cash reserves having to make up the difference, that balance has declined, forcing more pressure on the budget.

It's forcing GPC to make some difficult decisions to stem the budget gap, Kuhn noted.

Committee reviewed SRAs

Kuhn said a committee of park specialists reviewed each of the 86 parks on a variety of criteria. Some of the criteria include park visits, park revenue, potential for growth, geographical location, population base and water availability.

The committee divided the state into 10 different regions with the goal of keeping at least two full service parks in each region.

When the review process was completed for southwest Nebraska, the full service SRAs selected included Red Willow Reservoir, north of McCook, and Medicine Creek, north of

Cambridge.

Services have already been reduced at Rock Creek and the Champion Lake SRAs.

What does reduced service mean?

Kuhn explained the present plan calls for operating the entire park system as normal through the July 4th holiday.

He said this gets the system through the first two big holiday weekends—Memorial Day and July 4th.

GPC realizes the park system boosts local economies, as well as the state economy, with tourism being the state's third largest industry.

Just exactly what cuts will be made after the July 4th weekend still remains fluid until all funding options are determined, Kuhn noted.

Some of the cuts could include less mowing, less seasonal help and closing down some bathrooms to reduce on supplies and maintenance.

While those cuts may not be big money saving efforts in themselves, cumulatively for the state park system, it can be substantial, he added.

In terms of other funding options, Kuhn said he plans to meet with the Bureau of Reclamation, which owns Enders and Swanson. He wants to see if they would contribute funds towards operation and maintenance of the parks.

In some cases, small recreation areas are being taken over locally to insure full service. This, in turn, will make money available for other areas.

As a result, just exactly what cuts will be made remains up in the air.

He noted no parks are slated for closing as a result of the possible cutbacks.

Bill Christensen, superintendent at Enders, Rock Creek and Champion SRAs, said they haven't been fully briefed on what's ahead.

He did visit with Kuhn this week to learn more about the plan.

Christensen said his job is safe but if he ever leaves, he'd be surprised if they fill the position again.

Kuhn said of 166 possible positions, 30 remain unfilled due to budget considerations.

He said they will permanently reduce 21 full-time positions across the board if their budget needs aren't met by the Legislature.

People need to know

Ron Schoenberger, owner of Laker's in Enders, said people in southwest Nebraska need to be aware of what's happening.

"This is garbage," he said.

"The whole area will lose a lot of income if these lakes are let go," Schoenberger said.

He's also dismayed the plan is just gaining attention, even though the review process began last September.

Kuhn said there was no hidden agenda and that the plan will only be put into place if the Legislature cuts their funding.

Christensen said the total budget for operating Enders SRA totals about $66,000.

Schoenberger complimented Bill Christensen for the job he does at Enders with what he has to work with.

Christensen said campground reservations at Enders and Rock Creek historically have exceeded those at either Red Willow or Medicine Creek.

However, he speculated the declining stream inflows into Enders hurt the area during the review process.

And while Swanson’s level is up, the irrigation district below Swanson plans on releasing water there this summer.

That could have affected Swanson’s rating as well.