

A work in progress

Transformation continues at popular Idaho campground, but it isn't fully open yet

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HORSETHIEF RESERVOIR

The cost to camp at one of Idaho's most popular spots went from free to \$15 a night last summer.

The result: happy campers. Idaho Fish and Game contracted with the Treasure Valley Family YMCA to manage the campgrounds at Horsethief Reservoir beginning July 1, 2017. The two-year deal reaped immediate dividends with a better camping environment last summer and significant improvements for the 2018 season.

"We're pleasantly surprised,"



VIDEO

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said Joe Kozfkay, regional fisheries manager for Idaho Fish and Game. "... We're also happy with the trajectory of the place."

Fish and Game and the YMCA received few complaints about the new fee structure, the organizations say. Perhaps more importantly, non-medical calls for service to the Valley County Sheriff's Office dropped from an average of 11 per year from 2014 to 2016 to zero in 2017.



New picnic tables, fire rings and gravel parking areas have improved many of the campsites at Horsethief Reservoir, a primitive camping area that is becoming a little more civilized.

The YMCA took on the project because its Y Camp: Horsethief Reservoir shares the lake with the campgrounds — visitors drive past five Fish and Game campgrounds on their way to the camp.

"We felt like it was our social responsibility to step in and

preserve the uniqueness of this area," said Erik Bullock, the executive director of the Caldwell and Y Camp branches of the Treasure Valley Family YMCA. "We wanted to make it very family-friendly. That's the clientele we want using it."

Keith and Debbie Kinn of



Horsethief Reservoir is a no-wake lake, which forces power boaters to go slow.

Caldwell have camped at Horsethief for two decades. They served as hosts at the campground for the first time last summer and returned for this season. They're pleased with the changes they've seen — and have heard little negativity about the fee.

Families are the primary visitors on weekends, the Kinns said.

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CAMPGROUND

"For the families coming up here with campers, it's just getting nicer all the time," Keith said. "... There's just a lot of things going on all at one time."

The upgrades follow a tumultuous time for Horsethief camping. The campgrounds closed in mid-August in 2016 because the host resigned. A host is required as part of an agreement between adjacent landowners and Fish and Game, which owns the reservoir and campgrounds 9 miles east of Cascade.

The Valley County Sheriff's Office was called to Horsethief for non-medical reasons 10 times in 2016, including three times for shooting complaints (usually target practice or intoxicated people), according to records provided by the YMCA.

Idaho Fish and Game doesn't have statutory

authority to charge for camping and was spending about \$25,000 a year — half of its budget for fishing and boater access in the region — on Horsethief. The region has about 50 sites.

The deal with the YMCA provided a source of revenue to help fund Horsethief. It also allowed the YMCA to hire a full-time maintenance person who covers the Y Camp and the Horsethief campgrounds.

The primitive campgrounds rose up around Horsethief as anglers descended on the area and created their own spots. The reservoir was built in 1967 and Fish and Game formalized the campground to try to limit the damage being done by vehicles, campfires and the lack of restrooms. Still, there weren't designated campsites or fire rings.

"There was no account-



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ability," Bullock said. "It was too much for Fish and Game to keep up with it."

Fish and Game received two grants last year that have funded a transformation of the camping experience.

In the five campgrounds that line the west shore, picnic tables and fire rings have been added to many sites. Gravel and logs have been used to identify some individual sites.

In the campground on the northeast shore, work will continue this summer on a project to add full hookups to host sites. That should make it easier to recruit hosts in the future. That campground was

closed all of last season and could remain closed until 2019.

Horsethief, which doesn't have running water in its campgrounds, needs another host for this year.

"We're still struggling with hosts," Kozfkay said. "... The biggest problem (in the past) was having hosts quit on us and finding good hosts because of the lack of amenities. We were getting out-competed by other campgrounds for hosts."

Fish and Game applied for another grant for 2018 that would allow for modernizing the Kings Point campground that has the

Many of the campsites at the Horsethief Reservoir are within view of the water.

"We anticipated more challenges," said Scott Gill, a YMCA volunteer who serves on the Y Camp advisory board. "... When Fish and Game came to the Y, there was considerable reservation on the part of especially the Y staff. We didn't want this to become a burden to the existing Y staff."

Horsethief became a popular destination because of its fantastic fishing — kokanee, rainbow trout and brown trout fill the lake. But it's also a terrific spot for paddle sports because it's a no-wake lake, and the primitive experience (pit toilets are the only amenities) appeals to some campers.

"It's scenic, it's pretty close to the (Treasure) Valley, it's got outstanding fishing, and then you can camp right next to it," Kozfkay said. "All four of those things make it really, really popular. ... We anticipate we're going to be full for a good chunk of the season."

boat ramp on the west shore. The grant request includes plans to pave the road through the campground and improve drainage, Kozfkay said.

Other future plans include the potential for a reservation system. Right now, all Horsethief spots are first-come, first-served. The season runs from May 15 through at least Labor Day weekend. The campground fills on some of the busiest summer weekends.

So far, the YMCA is "thrilled" with the partnership, Bullock said. He expects it to continue beyond the initial two-year agreement.