

S.D. Hospital Hires Hotel Expert As V. President

SIoux FALLS (AP) — A South Dakota hospital has turned to the hotel industry to help with patient comfort.

Longtime hotel manager Tom Bosch has been named vice president of hospitality services at Avera McKennan Hospital in Sioux Falls.

The 46-year-old Bosch has been general manager at the Holiday Inn City Centre in Sioux Falls for 13 years. He begins his new job on Dec. 12.

David Kapaska, regional president for Avera, says he decided to hire Bosch after visiting the Ritz-Carlton hotel in San Francisco. Kapaska says hotels and hospitals are similar in food service, cleanliness and maintenance.

The *Argus Leader* reports that Bosch was in charge of 290 rooms at the Holiday Inn City Centre, South Dakota's largest hotel. McKennan has a total of 545 rooms.

Firefighters Battle Pair Of Grass Fires In Neb.

WOOD RIVER, Neb. (AP) — Firefighters have been busy fighting a pair of wind-fanned grass fires in the Wood River area.

Capt. Nick Lammers, of the Wood River Volunteer Fire Department, told the *Grand Island Independent* that firefighters spent about two hours Saturday afternoon fighting the first fire. Some area farmers were also enlisted to help plow a fire line.

The fire burned more than 20 acres before it was put out.

A few hours later, another grass fire was reported in the area. It was quickly put out.

Lammers says high winds made battling the fires difficult. The National Weather Service reported wind gusts of 52 mph in Wood River on Saturday.

N.D. Senior Center Stops Serving Breakfast

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Breakfast is no longer served at a longtime senior center in Fargo.

The NP Depot Senior Center says it will cook its last morning meal on Wednesday because of dwindling numbers.

Brian Arett, executive director for Valley Senior Services, says the breakfast crowd used to number between 25 and 40. Now it's down to about a half-dozen.

Arett tells *The Forum* newspaper that he would like breakfast to continue, but says there are better ways for the center to spend its money.

The center will continue to serve lunch, for a suggested \$1 donation.

B.H. Playhouse Seeks People To Adopt Rooms

RAPID CITY (AP) — The Black Hills Playhouse is looking for people to adopt dorm rooms.

Officials say the staff quarters at the Custer State Park facility have been in use since 1979 and are in dire need of repair. The renovation project includes 36 rooms, a common room, seven bathrooms and several entryways.

Nancy and Joe Reinhert of Rapid City have signed up for a room named the Copacabana. They started with a couch and chairs that a friend gave them, and plan to add a countertop with stools, TV and new refrigerator.

The program is called BHP Room Service. The *Rapid City Journal* reports that 17 rooms are still available for renovation.

Semi Damaged In Crash With Cow On Highway

HECLA (AP) — Authorities say a semitrailer was damaged when it struck a cow on a South Dakota Highway.

Brown County Sheriff's Deputy Kyle Crawford says the truck had damage to its grille and radiator. The driver was not hurt.

The accident happened Friday afternoon near Hecla.

Crawford tells the *Aberdeen American News* that the cow walked back to its farmstead after the collision. He says the cow had a slight limp, "but that was all."

S.D. Forest Service Battling Pine Beetle Epidemic

BY MARK VANGERPEN

Associated Press

NORTHERN HILLS — The Black Hills National Forest faces some serious challenges in terms of combating the mountain pine beetle, but its managers say there is hope of success.

In terms of the beetle epidemic, Forest Supervisor Craig Bobzien said that with the variety of resources available to us, we can be optimistic about successfully preventing the total infestation of the forest.

"I'm of the belief — and I will say this is a shared belief among a lot of people who are working on this — that in the Black Hills, we have the ingredients in place to have the best chance of being successful in having a healthy forest, of really any place that I know of in the West that's being threatened right now," Bobzien said.

To achieve that success, the Forest Service has formulated a strategy for responding to the beetles, but it will also take cooperation with governments, landowners and other entities across the forest.

The Western Bark Beetle Strategy, published by the Forest Service in July, identifies three main "prongs" or considerations in treating for the beetles: human safety, forest recovery after a devastating infestation, and long-term forest resiliency through thinning and treatment methods.

Bobzien said the Forest Service treats for safety first, in areas like campgrounds, trailheads, roads and the wildland/urban interface where public communities meet forestland.

He added, though, that many of those areas aren't facing serious public safety threats right now.

"(Safety) is our first priority, but it's the smallest part of what we do on the Black Hills," Bobzien said. "We don't have many areas like that because we've been able to manage so much of the forest in advance of the beetles."

"We are really working to look at the areas that are both most at risk and where the public resource values are the highest — said differently, where we'd have the greatest consequence if we didn't take any action."

Strategically, Bobzien said the most effective place to be — and where the Forest Service is trying to be and remain — is in the "leading edge" zone, which is the area beetles are approaching but have not yet reached.

Strengthening the forest in those areas will presumably prevent the beetles from extending any farther, protecting the forest from further infestation.

But the cumbersome regulations by which the Forest Service must abide sometimes keep it from getting to leading edge zones before the beetles do, and Bobzien said some of the leading edge zones that were identified

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CRAIG BOBZIEN

earlier are filling up with bug-hit trees pretty quickly.

Delayed action is nothing new for the Forest Service, which is hampered by federal regulations, budget processes and litigation from outside sources. Approving a timber sale can take years. Sometimes plans need to adapt during that time to meet new threats, but regulations prevent a quick change in direction.

"It's like the Titanic — if you see a threat coming at you, how hard is it to change course and do something different? It's not very easy," said Northern Hills District Ranger Rhonda O'Byrne.

Bobzien said that the 325,000-acre Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project, along with various other projects that amount to about 200,000 acres, will help decrease response time to newly-hit areas and increase the ability to create a beetle-preventing barrier of thinned, healthy forest in leading edge zones.

Some of those projects could have boots on the ground by summer of 2012.

Bobzien said that approving that many acres for a quick response is critical to staying ahead of the spreading infestation.

"We have just got to look at every possible stand that could be threatened here and analyze this now," he said. "I don't think we can (assume) that this is moving at such a pace that we can keep up with it."

O'Byrne said the Forest Service's main defense in battling the pine beetles is the timber sale, which allows the timber industry to harvest trees on federal land and what makes thinning in leading edge zones possible.

Maintaining those timber sales in advance of the beetles is "clearly our niche here," Bobzien said. Without timber sales, which actually create revenue for the Forest Service, then the Black Hills would have to rely on federal funding to fight the beetles, as many other forests in the U.S. do. And federal funds are in short supply these days.

Unfortunately, while the Black Hills has sold more timber than any other forest nationwide in the past five years, the beetles

are still advancing, and the timber industry has limits to what it can economically log on the forest.

In other words, the timber sale can't be our only preventative measure, and O'Byrne said the Forest Service recognizes that. The Forest Service is working with private landowners and volunteer organizations to find a solution for how to best treat the forest.

A lot of landowners and volunteers have come forward in the past six months, ardently trying to help the Forest Service remove beetle-killed trees from national forest land. But there are time-consuming processes for that too.

While O'Byrne and Bobzien said they are impressed with that effort forest wide, it's not as simple as handing a volunteer a hardhat and chainsaw and setting him loose in the forest.

Legal questions need to be answered first: what degree of training will volunteers need to undergo? Who will pay for it? If a volunteer is injured on the forest, who is liable?

"We are trying to find some instrument that will let the Forest Service work with these other entities ... so that the timber sale contract isn't our only option," O'Byrne said.

"Right now we're looking through law regulation policy that affects the Forest Service, seeing if there's some way that's legal out there for us to be able to do it. We really want to be able to work with them, but it's the mechanics of trying to be able to do that ... All the federal processes, the laws that we have to meet, they're there for a good reason, but it takes time to get through them."

Along with volunteers eager to help are those eager to offer advice, which in turn generates a wide variety of ideas and values about the best treatment strategies and most critical areas to protect. Bobzien said there is no universal strategy for everybody to follow, because the beetles affect different jurisdictions that have different priorities and methods.

That said, Bobzien said there is a need for cooperation and forest-wide prioritization of areas that need to be treated.

"The reality of it is that we do have to prioritize areas, by looking at the values at risk and the consequences of not going there," Bobzien said. "We clearly have to do that. We do that on a daily and weekly basis."

Those priority areas naturally shift as new beetle attacks appear or existing ones expand, and even as funding is allocated and spent. Safety is always the top priority, but Bobzien said the Forest Service will also work to protect the economic, recreational and environmental assets in the forest as well, because even though fighting the beetles is tough to do with limited funds, doing nothing could end up costing even more.

Medicare

From Page 1

One of her brand-name anti-seizure drugs cost about \$370 in the gap last year, and the other about \$270. This year Friedman paid about \$150 and \$130, respectively, for a month's supply.

Medicare covers about 47 million older and disabled people, and about 9 in 10 have some kind of prescription plan. Most rely on the drug benefit, also known as Part D, which is delivered through private insurance plans.

Beneficiaries have until Dec. 7 to change their drug plans for 2012. Consumer advocates recommend that seniors check their coverage during open enrollment to see if their current choice remains the best for next year. Many families start the process around the Thanksgiving holiday.

The coverage gap, a money-saving idea from a previous Congress, never has been popular.

It starts after an individual beneficiary and his or her drug plan have spent a total of \$2,840 on medications for the year. Seniors are then on their own for the next \$3,600.

Once total spending reaches about \$6,440, Medicare's catastrophic coverage kicks in and beneficiaries pay only a token amount. Most people do not spend enough in the doughnut hole to qualify for catastrophic coverage.

Although few private insurance plans still cap the amount they spend on medications, Medicare's hole-in-the-middle approach is highly unusual.

The Republican-led Congress that passed the drug benefit under President George W. Bush was trying to balance coverage and costs, as many conservatives fretted about creating a new unfunded entitlement.

Supporters wanted all beneficiaries to get some initial benefit from the program, and they wanted to protect those with overwhelmingly high costs. The resulting compromise led to the doughnut hole.

Under Obama's health care law, the gap will be gradually phased down by 2020.

This year, the law provides a 50 percent discount on brand name drugs and 7 percent break on generics. Next year the discount on generics rises to 14 percent. When the changes are fully phased in, beneficiaries will still be responsible for their annual deductible and 25 percent of the cost of their medications until they reach catastrophic coverage.

If Republicans succeed in repealing what they dismiss as "Obamacare," the discounts would be wiped out as well.

Joan Gibbs thought her pharmacy had made a mistake. Her total cost for a brand-name

painkiller in the doughnut hole came out lower than her co-payment earlier in the year, at a time her plan was picking up most of the tab.

"I reluctantly called the insurance company," said Gibbs, 54, who lives near Cleveland. "If they had made a mistake, I knew they would catch it sooner or later. I was very surprised that it turned out to be such a good discount."

Gibbs is on Medicare because of an auto-immune disorder and other medical problems that left her unable to work.

Other beneficiaries say it's still a struggle, even with the discounts.

John Robinson of Bel Air, Md., has diabetes and heart problems. A retired director of patient accounts for a hospital, Robinson said he runs up his credit card balance to pay for insulin, other medications and diabetic supplies in the doughnut hole.

"Thank God for credit cards," said Robinson, 71. "I thought it was better this year, but it still cost me more money than I had."

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 Medicare plan finder:
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