

Rainbow Family cleaning up WA gathering site

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LONGVIEW, Wash. —

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Gifford Pinchot National Forest officials said this week they are cautiously optimistic that the Rainbow Family of Living Light will keep that promise.

"All in all, I think we're very pleased with the way things are coming off," U.S. Forest Service spokesman Ken Sandusky said of the group's cleanup effort. "They've committed to stay in the area until they're done."

An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people gathered in the first week of July deep in the national forest for the Rainbow Family's annual gathering. Rainbow Family members, a loose network of hippies, street kids and counterculture enthusiasts, have been gathering on National Forest lands to pray for world peace since 1972.

With so many people camping for days or even weeks in the area, one of the key questions surrounding the event is how much environmental damage caused.

"That forest that we are gathering in will be cleaner when we leave than before we got there," one elder Rainbow Family member promised participants of a Lewis Valley town hall meeting in the days leading up to the gathering.

On Tuesday, Rainbow member Jim Budd, who is part of the restoration crew, said the clean-up "is going magnificently well."

"It'll be restored to what it was - with the caveat that you can't put that many people on a piece of land without leaving a little bit of a mark," said Budd, 46, of Santa Cruz, Calif., who has been camping in and near the meadow since June 25.

Budd, who is known as "Smiling Bear" among the Rainbow Family, said nearly 50 Rainbow members still are cleaning up around the meadow.

Forest Service officials said they're taking a "wait and see" approach to the cleanup process.

A big concern, Sandusky said, are all of the fire pits the Rainbow members dug, which can disturb a delicate balance of microorganisms in the soil.

"It's going to be a scar," he said. "Even the filled-in pits are not going to be same for a while."

Forest service officials are also worried about ensuring that compacted soils along trails loosened, slit-trench latrines are buried and garbage is hauled out.

Ron Freeman, a public services staff officer who is overseeing the cleanup for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, said he is surprised that so many thousands of people didn't cause more damage to the meadow. The plan, he said, is to have the Rainbow crew reseed trampled areas with indigenous seed to ensure non-native plant species don't take root.

"Our biggest concern in the future is invasive plants," Freeman said. "You have people coming from all over the country. If they have an invasive plant, it could have hitchhiked a ride on their vehicles."

The Rainbow crew has also piled up "huge mounds of garbage" and are separating out recyclables before hauling the trash out. Wildlife, including elk and deer, are already returning the meadow. Budd said he recently saw a bear in the creek.

Rainbow members have covered all of the cleanup costs, Freeman said.

He said it will take about three seasons before nature erases all trace of the Rainbow gathering. Still, he said, "to the casual observer, if they went up there next summer, they might not notice as much."

Information from: The Daily News, <http://www.tdn.com>