

## Additional Guidelines Needed for Expedia-Like Campsite Bookings?

Jason Shueh | February 10, 2015



The U.S. Department of Agriculture is faced with a unique challenge in open data: It must decide whether federal campsites should be booked like hotel rooms are reserved on such travel sites as Orbitz and Expedia.

The looming decision was [highlighted again this month](#) by way of a revision to a 10-year — and roughly \$150 million — [draft RFP](#) that seeks management for Recreation.gov, the federal government's official website for campsite reservations. Through the lobbying group Access Land, tech and recreation groups like the Sierra Club, REI and Code for America [have expressed worries](#) the RFP will place too much power in the hands of the winning contractor to manage the site. This control, the group contends, could exclude private companies from an equal opportunity for booking commissions within their own websites and mobile apps.

Despite such concerns, Alyssa Ravasio, the group's director, praised the revisions to the RFP as significant progress. Of specific note, Ravasio commended the new RFP for requirements that turn campsite reservation updates into open data, information that will be digitally accessible to all.

"The improvements around open data, especially requiring access to real-time availability data and making it clear that the [Recreation.gov booking system] needs to enable reservations from third parties, are fantastic," she said.

Still of concern, however, are the areas of booking commissions and the technology required to reserve campsites. The RFP still doesn't command any kind of financial accountability to third-party vendors, such as details on commission percentages, nor are there specifications that a reservation system must be accessible inside an app, such as with an application programming interface ( [API](#)). The absence of such ingredients has seeded worries that booking commissions for outside companies will be severely marginalized or completely nonexistent altogether.

"If the government wants to harness the creativity of the private sector, they need to set guidelines for how third parties are going to be financially rewarded," Ravasio said. "This is absolutely critical if they want entrepreneurs to be incentivized to build innovative applications that help connect Americans with their land."

As a founder of a campsite booking tech startup called Hipcamp — which hopes to generate some of its own revenues through the open booking format — Ravasio said the ambiguity could jeopardize her business if Hipcamp's app and others can't book a campsite directly inside an app. She also suggested the hotel industry may be a good guide on finance with typical commission percentages ranging between 20 and 30 percent of a room fee.

"The most concerning section is where the contract states that in terms of satisfying third-party transactions, a link out to Recreation.gov might be good enough," Ravasio said. "If you ever have been bumped out of a mobile application to complete the transaction on a different website, you know this is a confusing, frustrating experience."

Recreation.gov's current contractor, the ACTIVE Network, did not provide comment about the API or possible financial collaborations with other companies.

Despite the absence of guarantees, prospects might not be so grim. The USDA could be positioning its RFP to give itself the widest range of movement before its final decision. The official RFP is expected to be released in the early summer, with a vendor review to follow in the months following. In a press release, Rick Delappe, Recreation One-Stop program manager, who coordinates the RFP, commented specifically on the technology.

"[An] API is the technology for sharing data today, but requiring this technology over the life of a 10-year contract would jeopardize the use of new and innovative approaches for data sharing in the next decade," he said.

And while it was confirmed by USDA Spokesperson Janelle Smith that no monetary requirements or a timeline for such had been introduced in the draft RFP, there is broad language that asks submitting contractors to include a strategy for collaboration with third parties that allows reservations through "multiple channels."

The agency has also received guidance on the issue from [U.S. Digital Services](#), which serves as digital consultants on major federal projects, and from [18F](#), an internal government IT contractor specializing in technology development.

"At the end of the day, we all want the same thing," DeLappe said. "We want to provide the public with a service that makes it easy to find information about places they want to go and to reserve adventures they want to have on America's federal lands."

Ultimately, tech and recreation advocates may have to wait until the contract is actually awarded before judgments can be cast on solutions, whether they're token gestures or a functional proposal for both technical and financial collaboration.

Those wishing to comment on the RFP can do so until Feb. 17 at the [USDA's RFP site](#).

<http://www.govtech.com/gov-experience/Additional-Guidelines-Needed-for-Expedia-Like-Campsite-Bookings.html>