

Land of the fee

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Map by Diane Sylvain

Recreation fees promised a jackpot for money-starved federal agencies. So far, they're a drop in the bucket, and they lock some people out.

INYO NATIONAL FOREST, Calif. - Extending up the east side of the Sierras from Sequoia National Park to Yosemite, the Inyo National Forest is a mecca for recreationists. Each year, the forest counts about 14 million hikers, campers, hunters, skiers, climbers and mountain bikers, making it the fifth most popular forest in the nation for recreation. Every summer, tens of thousands of visitors gaze at Mono Lake, climb the hulking, 14,495-foot Mount Whitney, and hike the Ansel Adams and John Muir wilderness areas, part of what Muir called "the Range of Light."

For a veteran wilderness ranger like Diana Pietrasanta, this should be heaven.

Pietrasanta, 41, has a background in botany and spent nine years with the Park Service before switching to the Forest Service, 11 years ago. Athletic and outspoken, Pietrasanta has the tan of one who spends a lot of time outdoors. "Mountaineering," she says, "is my first love."

But as the head of the Inyo's wilderness program, her life as a ranger has morphed into life as a budget cruncher. The forest's entire wilderness-management budget of approximately \$450,000 for fiscal year 2000 has been siphoned off for management staff and region-wide projects.

"Right now, we literally have no money for wilderness rangers," says Pietrasanta.

In the early 1990s, she says, she had eight to 10 seasonal rangers on her district. No more. "It's not so much that our allocations have dropped severely, it's just where they're going. No money gets to the ground."

Instead of offering a budget large enough to pay rangers, Pietrasanta's supervisors have asked her to start charging wilderness area visitors under the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Instituted as a three-year test program in 1996 and recently extended by Congress to 2001, "fee demo," as it's been dubbed, has been touted as the new source of revenue for the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (HCN, 10/13/97: The land is still public, but it's no longer free). Congress passed the program after it had spent a decade cutting the budgets of the agencies.

Now, around the West, fee booths have appeared at dozens of trailheads and entrance gates. Campers pay to use picnic tables and tent sites. Hikers, bikers, cross-country skiers and snowmobilers pay to use trails, or to park at trailheads. Visitors pay to watch natural history videos and to drive forest roads. Fees are popping up like lodgepole seedlings after a forest fire.

From the start, critics have railed against the fee program, arguing that tax money, not tickets, should pay for the public lands. Small but spirited protests have been held against it around the country, and at least 11 people face court hearings for refusing to pay fees (see story page 10).

Still, the program enjoys broad high-level support.

"It's very hard to find any opponents in Washington, D.C.," says Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. "The higher up the management level you go, the more support you find for the program."

The Clinton administration supports the fee program as part of reinventing government; fiscal conservatives support it under the rubric of charging those who benefit from something; appropriating legislators like it because it frees up money for other causes; and agency heads scrambling for funds think it's the best thing since sliced bread.

"We've had a tremendous boon from being able to keep the money on the ground," says Jane Moore, fee program manager for the National Park Service in Washington, D.C. The parks grossed \$144 million from fees in 1999. Money that has not already been spent on fee collection and overhead will help patch an estimated \$3.5 billion maintenance backlog.

The other agencies have not fared as well, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grossing \$3.4 million last year, while the BLM pulled in \$5.1 million. The Forest Service, for its part, grossed \$26.5 million from fees last year. While that's not much when you compare it to the agency's \$300 million annual recreation budget, Linda Feldman, the Forest Service's national fee demonstration manager in Washington, D.C., calls the program "a huge success."

"Learning about being in business has been a wonderful exercise for us," she says.

But the Inyo experience suggests that on the ground, the Forest Service is struggling to make the fee program work. In the process, the agency is being forced to think more like a business that caters to tourists and less like an agency that cares for the land.

"The frustration is, I don't have a business background," says Pietrasanta, who is designing a fee program she hopes will put wilderness rangers back out on the trails.

"I didn't wake up one day and say, 'I'll start a small business,' but that's what I'm doing. It has to be successful, because if it's not, I'm in big trouble."

Fees fail to deliver

The story of funding on the Inyo is a common one: Visitation is booming, hovering between 7 and 8 million "recreation visitor days" (one person for 12 hours) each year. Meanwhile, its operations budget as defined by Congress has declined 10 percent in real terms since 1996. The forest's recreation budget has dropped 33 percent in real terms over six years.

As a result, the forest and its visitors are neglected. Regular trail maintenance, such as repairing water bars, isn't happening, so trails wash out. With fewer rangers in the backcountry, illegal fires and trash dumping have increased.

In such a climate, a new influx of fee money was a happy prospect. The idea was not new - people had been paying to visit the national parks and use forest campgrounds for decades. The difference was that the agencies got to keep the money, rather than returning it to the U.S. Treasury as they had in the past.

Under the original fee demonstration legislation, 80 percent of fees collected above the 1995 level were to stay where they were collected. When Congress extended the program in 1998, it said the agencies could keep all of the fee money, as long as 80 percent of it stayed on site.

Fee proponents said the result would be new money for desperate forests. Yet the two fee projects on the Inyo have revealed no pot of gold.

The Schulman Grove Visitors' Center is a prime example of dashed expectations. Thousands of visitors come to see Schulman Grove, a sparse forest of twisted bristlecone pines, some more than 4,000 years old. A paved road winds up the White Mountains to the visitors' center, new outhouses, a picnic area and a thicket of interpretive signs.

The visitors' center, built in 1996, was constructed with appropriated dollars, not fee demo funds. But Forest Service officials concluded almost immediately that more visitors, a longer summer season and reduced appropriations from Congress had created "a situation where current and expected funding levels are no longer adequate to fund even base-level service," according to a business plan. The plan estimated the agency could collect \$2 per person or \$5 per car at the visitors' center, and raise \$27,275 in new revenues in 1998.

The projections turned out to be wildly optimistic. During 1998, the first year a fee was charged, visitation dropped by one third and the agency collected only \$12,600, less than half of the projected amount. In 1999, gross revenues came to just \$16,898.

"I relied on the best data we had, but it just wasn't very good," says Schulman Grove manager John Louth. Still, he says, fee money has helped. Without the fee project, "I'd have one paid person, we'd be open five days a week from the middle of June to September 10 or 15." With the project, he has one paid staffer, two volunteers, and can keep the visitors' center open from late May to mid-November.

Such meager returns hardly justify overdeveloping places like this, says Gary Guenther, a former Inyo wilderness ranger who is now one of the forest's fiercest watchdogs: "I don't think a fee is appropriate here. People come here primarily for the natural wonders, not the amenities."

The Inyo's experience at the Mono Lake Scenic Area was even more dramatic. In 1992 the Forest Service opened a new visitors' center on the edge of the hamlet of Lee Vining, which overlooks the lake. A high desert lake at the head of the Owens Valley, Mono Lake became an environmental symbol as it slowly began to die. Los Angeles was diverting its inlet streams for municipal water, and the lake level was dropping precipitously. In the mid-1990s, environmentalists and the city agreed to partially restore lake levels and help restore surrounding wetlands, an achievement celebrated in the visitors' center displays (HCN, 12/8/97: Mono Lake: Victory over Los Angeles turns into local controversy).

As at Schulman Grove, the Mono Lake visitors' center had little money for operations, so Director Deanna Dulen developed a fee program to fill the void. The plan was to charge 116,000 annual visitors \$2 at two sites: the entrance to a natural history film and exhibit in the visitors' center and a kiosk to be built beside a parking lot near South Tufa, the most popular shoreside visitation site.

"We went for the lowest fee we thought we could," says Dulen. She projected first-year receipts of \$364,741. Yet, in 1997, the first year of operations, the program brought in only \$87,000. In 1998, the take rose slightly to \$95,000.

Dulen says half the visitors simply skipped the interpretive displays and sidestepped the fees.

Of those who used the displays, many got in free with Golden Eagle passes, good for entry to national parks and honored at Mono Lake. "It turned out that, at the visitors' center, only 16 to 18 percent were paying," she says.

"You would think people would pay to go to a beautiful visitors center," says Dulen. "They pay to go to museums, they pay to go to art exhibits." Visitors did pay at the outdoor kiosk, she says, where only 5 percent turned back. She hopes to corral more cash this year by dropping the visitors' center fee completely and raising the South Tufa charge to \$3 per person.

Where has all the money gone?

Few in the agencies are complaining about the new money; every little bit helps. But questions remain about how the agencies spend it. Critics within the Forest Service say if a fee project raises money, that simply frees up funds to be spent on overhead. Instead of forcing the agency to function more efficiently, they say, fees only ensure that appropriated funds will fuel the bureaucracy, while ground-level managers scramble for cash.

Fees are "all part of the same pot, all money that's going toward running the machine," says one Forest Service employee who asked not to be named. "Everybody has gotten cut, but permanent employees and upper-level management have been more protected and haven't felt it as much."

Inyo Forest Supervisor Jeff Bailey disagrees. "Are we shifting money from one thing to support another? I don't see that happening." He says all forest programs must pay for increasing overhead. "There are some national programs, and even region-wide programs in California, that are taking money away from us. Large planning efforts that are going on, and lawsuits that have been filed against the Forest Service have required millions of dollars to resolve."

Fees may make up the difference in some areas, but not all, he says. Since fee revenues currently can be spent only where they are collected, the Inyo is spending them on facilities related to visitors who pay a fee - trails, interpretive signs and outhouses - rather than backcountry habitat restoration or biological surveys.

At Mono Lake, the Forest Service last year proposed paving the road to South Tufa - a proposal that riled the 17,000-member Mono Lake Committee. "We thought fees should go toward education and restoration at Mono Lake," says Heidi Hopkins, eastern Sierra policy director with the committee in Lee Vining. "It should not go toward paving roads and plugging their budget." The paving project since has been shelved.

Hopkins blames Congress, not the Forest Service, for shortfalls. "It seems there's been a political attack on the Forest Service. It's the resource side of the agency that's suffering. To give them credit, I think the Forest Service overall has done a wonderful job at Mono Lake. It's painful watching them struggle to do their job without the funds."

"There are lots of things we need to do out there to protect those lands, to manage those lands, that logically are not going to generate dollars," says Bailey. "That's the core of

what we are supposed to be doing here."

Pressure to pull in a profit

Running agencies more like businesses has strong appeal in some circles. "I don't think that fee demo is going to make the Forest Service totally self-sufficient," says Terry Anderson, executive director of the Political Economy Research Center, a free-market think tank in Bozeman, Mont. "But it will get the agency thinking about ways to link consumer demand with producer supply."

A recent policy paper by the center concluded that fee demo is "a step in the right direction" that gives land managers freedom to work without congressional interference. The report says the appropriation system has led to poor maintenance, wasteful spending and neglected public lands.

"Fee demo provides revenues that are sorely needed to support infrastructure that isn't going to get those revenues any other way," Anderson says. "Even though \$25,000 might be a trivial amount in a forest's budget, that \$25,000 may be just what was needed to clean up an outhouse or repair an eroding road.

"He who pays the piper calls the tune," Anderson adds. And if recreationists ante up, the Forest Service and other land agencies will be more sympathetic to their needs and desires, he says.

Others see a double standard. When timber was the mainstay of the national forests, the federal government subsidized logging companies to the tune of millions of dollars each year in road-building costs. Now that the forests are seen less as sources of raw materials and more as the nation's playgrounds, shouldn't Congress subsidize recreation?

"In the Forest Service's \$3 billion budget, \$30 million (the amount fee demo grossed for the Forest Service from 1996 through 1998) is nothing," says James Wilson, owner of Wilson's Eastside Sports in Bishop, Calif., a gateway to the Inyo National Forest.

Wilson worries that fee demo is the first step toward privatization of public lands, an echo of the European feudal system "where you'd get shot if you poached the king's rabbit.

"I don't think I could support a national fee for recreation," Wilson adds, "until (Idaho

Sen.) Larry Craig supports an equitable fee for timber harvest and (New Mexico Sen. Pete) Domenici supports an equitable grazing fee.

"How much value do you put on biodiversity?" he asks. "What's a wolverine worth?"

Wilson has a surprising array of allies in this community. "Our main concern is that this is where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer," says Bill Wright, president of the Bishop Chapter of People for The USA. "What you're taxing is the middle class to low-income people. I think the government should finance the parks, the forests, the BLM land for public recreation."

Wright argues that recreation fees will not bring more money to the Forest Service. He predicts that as fee revenues go up, appropriations will go down.

No one has trumpeted this message louder than Scott Silver, who is spearheading the anti-fee movement through his Bend, Ore., group, Wild Wilderness. Silver, a biochemist by training and an avid backcountry skier, started Wild Wilderness with a friend in 1990, to watchdog snowmobile groups and skiers who were pushing for more trails and easier access.

In 1997, a pamphlet on the fee demonstration program "launched me on a crusade," he says.

Today, he fires off e-mail alerts around the country, urging people to protest fees, write their representatives, and pressure the agencies to go to Congress, not the public, for their funding.

"There has been this outcry that fee demo's great because it's supplemental to other revenues, but it's not supplemental," Silver says. He points to the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon, where the congressionally appropriated wilderness budget dropped 48 percent in real terms between 1995 and 2000.

Some would argue that the budget would have dropped regardless. Silver says fee demo has been the agency's excuse to keep appropriated money upstairs.

"I think the land managers see no other option," he says. "Everyone from the General Accounting Office to the environmental community has just hammered on the Forest

Service for its financial incompetence. They see their budgets being cut, and they don't see that there's anything else to do other than adopt this new entrepreneurial spirit."

The future holds fees

On the Inyo, Diana Pietrasanta thinks she has a winner. This winter, her wilderness fee kicked in: Hikers will pay \$15 for a wilderness reservation on two trails leading to Mount Whitney, and \$5 for a reservation on 35 other trails in the John Muir, Ansel Adams and Golden Trout wilderness areas. Pietrasanta expects the program to raise \$387,000 per year. It will pay five or six seasonal rangers where there would have been none, and fund the new reservations office.

She is confident that her program will be more successful than the Inyo's past efforts, because unlike the Schulman Grove and Mono Lake fees, the Mount Whitney fee is difficult to circumvent. Whitney is the tallest peak in the Lower 48, and a permit is required to climb it. Chances of getting a permit are one in 10, so people will pay to make reservations. On other trails, people who plan in advance may happily pay \$5 to be assured they can hike their intended trail.

"The demand," says Pietrasanta, "is greater than the availability. We're lucky to have desirable icons on our forest."

On the national level, a Golden Eagle-style pass is in the offing. "In the Pacific Northwest, starting in March, they will have a new region-wide pass," says Linda Feldman, who will give a progress report to Congress in February. "We will be coming up with a region-wide prototype that we will be looking to as a model for a nationwide pass."

Another wave of the future: automated fee machines. Simply insert your credit card, and out comes a parking pass for your windshield. The machines save the cost of hiring humans to collect fees, says the Park Service's Jane Moore, but they're not without their glitches. One fee machine in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee was hit twice by lightning. A second was colonized by spiders.

Opposition to fees, meanwhile, does not seem to be catching on at the national level.

California Republican Rep. Mary Bono became one of the few vocal fee opponents in Congress after a region-wide Adventure Pass tested in four Southern California forests met heated opposition from locals. On Feb. 23, 1999, Bono introduced the Forest Tax

Relief Act (HR 786) which would remove the Forest Service from the fee program. But she found only nine co-sponsors, and the bill currently languishes before the House Subcommittee on Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry, where it has been since March 1.

"We're hopeful that perhaps we'll see a hearing sometime next year (2000)," says Frank Cullen, Bono's spokesman. But he concedes that the bill may die in committee.

The flaccid response is no surprise to Scott Silver. "The Forest Service has already bet the house that industrial strength recreation is the future," he says. "Recreation is going to get blown way out of proportion."

Fees will only push agencies to attract more people to the already crowded public lands, says Silver.

And the feds are already marketing the West as the playground of the world. He envisions a day when logging roads are turned into ORV trails, when ski resorts and visitors' centers pepper the forests, when national parks are nothing more than the "flagship stores" that attract the masses to giant gateway malls.

"I'm going to miss the old West," he says. "I've got friends who are working to get the last cow off the last acre. I wish to hell they'd wake up and address the real issue. We've got a whole new threat coming."

Hal Clifford writes from Telluride, Colorado. He is the author of *The Falling Season: Inside the Life and Death Drama of Aspen's Mountain Rescue Team*.