

July 8, 2001

Western Slope No-Fee Coalition

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Forest Fee Protesters Met With Armed Roadblocks; 50 Ticketed

Over 100 members of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition were met with two roadblocks and armed forest rangers when they attempted to hold a demonstration against a new fee area at Canyon Creek, near Ouray, Colorado on July 7th. Although offered the option of leaving with no penalty, an estimated 50 vehicles proceeded into the fee area and their drivers stood in line to receive Federal citations. Extra rangers from throughout Colorado were called in to reinforce local staff of the Uncompahgre National Forest in the unprecedented law enforcement action.

At the first roadblock, District Ranger Jim Free prevented demonstration organizer Robert Funkhouser of Norwood from holding protest signs and passing out literature to the stopped vehicles. According to Funkhouser, Free told him that protest activity was not allowed in the area around the roadblock. "Since the vehicles were on a public roadway and had already been stopped by the Forest Service, I believe I had a First Amendment right to hold up signs and offer literature," said Funkhouser. He plans to make the same argument in the Federal Court in Grand Junction when he contests his ticket.

Along with individual participants, demonstrators included organized contingents from the Seniors Outdoors and Creepers Jeepers Clubs of Durango. When all vehicles were stopped at the first roadblock and advised to either purchase a pass or turn back, those options were broadcast to the Club members on CB radio. According to Seniors Outdoors leader John Montle, "Not one of our members chose to make a U-turn." At the second roadblock, participating vehicles were forced to pull to the side of the road and wait in line for one of four officers to come and write their citations.

When he learned that only drivers were being cited, Creepers Jeepers member Bill Millener unhooked his mountain bike from a rack on the vehicle in which he was a passenger and rode it out of the area and back in again, determined to receive his own ticket. The fee applies to all wheeled vehicles, including mountain bikes, motorcycles, and ATVs.

An additional ranger was stationed near the summit of Imogene Pass, a summer-only 4WD route between Telluride and Ouray, checking traffic coming from the Telluride side. Those

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who had received tickets at the roadblock were

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waved on through, while those coming from Telluride were required to either purchase a pass or turn back.

Forest officials stated that the roadblocks were a routine exercise, not specifically directed against the No-Fee Coalition demonstrators. However, several vehicles that were not involved in the demonstration drove past the roadblock and continued on into the fee area without being checked by the officers, who were busy writing tickets to protesters, patiently awaiting their turns. The roadblocks were dismantled and the rangers left the area around 3 PM, shortly after the last Coalition protesters had departed.

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition opposes recreation fees for a number of reasons, including double taxation, commercialization of public lands, and their discriminatory impact on low-income citizens. Funding public lands with entry fees changes the focus from resource protection to maximizing revenue, two mutually exclusive objectives. The Coalition hopes to convince Colorado's congressional delegation to restore full funding to maintenance and management of federal lands through the appropriations process.

The Canyon Creek fee area is in Ouray County, and includes Yankee Boy Basin, Mount Sneffels, and Imogene Pass. It was designated on May 25th under the "Fee Demo" program. Fee Demo is a temporary demonstration program authorized by Congress in 1996 and since renewed twice. Currently set to expire in 2002, it is designed to test whether Americans are willing to pay for recreation in National Forests, Parks, BLM Lands, and Fish and Wildlife Refuges. In addition to the new fees for recreation, already existing fees such as National Park admission charges were dramatically increased, often doubled. The additional funds are intended to stay in the areas where they are collected to help with improvements and maintenance backlogs. However, budget cutbacks in recent years have forced the agencies to use a large and increasing share of the fees collected for routine expenses like trash collection and toilet maintenance. A substantial share also goes to the cost of collection and enforcement of the fee programs.

Demonstrators who received citations face a potential fine of \$25. They plan to plead not guilty in Federal Court in Grand Junction, and claim that the fees apply to recreational use and that their protest was political speech, protected by the First Amendment, not recreation. The Courts have dismissed similar cases in other areas. No court dates have been assigned yet to the Yankee Boy protesters.