

**Western Slope No-Fee Coalition  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kitty Benzar, 970/259-4616 or Ron DeWitz, 970/387-5113

An appeal has been filed protesting the Forest Service's decision to develop a new fee area at Little Molas Lake on the San Juan National Forest which would charge for picnicking, day use, and camping. The lake is located about one mile from Highway 550 near the top of Molas Pass between Durango and Silverton.

Although the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965 prohibits federal agencies from charging a fee "solely for the use of picnic tables," day users at Little Molas Lake would be charged a fee for exactly that.

"Little Molas is one of the last remaining places on the San Juan National Forest that allows free recreation close to a highway and near a lake. It is relatively undeveloped and the people who use it like it that way," said co-appellant Kitty Benzar of Durango. "There are plenty of options for those who want developed recreation and are willing to pay for it, but this is one of the last places where low-income and working people can still camp and picnic in a such a beautiful place on their public lands for free."

The Forest Service plan calls for a 20-site campground, a fee-collection kiosk, a potable water system, and a day-use picnic area at the lake, as well as a parking lot beside Highway 550. Three new toilets are planned, including one at the highway parking lot. A private, for-profit company would manage both day use and camping. Camping would cost about \$10-\$12 and picnicking would cost \$5-\$6. Fees would be set by the concessionaire and could be raised without public input. The plan would cost \$700,000 to implement.

A scaled-back plan to rehabilitate the area's vegetation, designate 15 primitive camping spots, replace the existing toilet with a barrier-free, minimum-odor model, and improve the access road is favored by the group of 12 appellants. The more moderate plan, known as Alternative 3, would cost only \$163,000 and would leave access to the area free for both campers and day users.

"The overwhelming majority of those who commented favored rehabilitation, not development," said Ron DeWitz of Silverton, another co-appellant. "The Forest Service decision ignored the fact that public opinion was overwhelmingly against their plan, while overwhelmingly favoring Alternative 3. This decision was a done deal and the public comment period was nothing but a sham. We know that the Little Molas Lake area needs rehabilitation, but their plan is way over the top."

Two co-founders of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, Benzar and Robert Funkhouser of Norwood, are among the 12 appellants, as are DeWitz and several other Silverton residents, including Silverton Mayor Jim Huffman, Town Councilor Dave Fiddler and San Juan County Commissioner Terry Rhoades.

Grounds for the group's appeal include the Forest Service's failure to adequately consider comments opposing the day use fee, the visual intrusion of the new parking lot on the viewshed of the San Juan Skyway National Scenic Byway, and unfair competition between the new campground and nearby Molas Lake Park, operated by the Town of Silverton.

Funding for the proposed project would include \$346,000 from Durango Mountain Resort. DMR was required to provide that amount as part of a land swap that gave them ownership of the Purgatory Campground across from the resort, which is being converted to homesites. Another \$100,000 would come from a Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) grant specifically for the parking lot. The remaining \$254,000 would be taxpayer funded.

"GOCO money is state funds for recreation and should not be given to a federal agency for development that excludes some Colorado taxpayers," DeWitz asserted. "This parking lot is not needed and would be an eyesore in the middle of one of the most beautiful views anywhere in the world."

"At a time when the Forest Service is claiming an \$800 million dollar maintenance backlog and raiding recreation funds for firefighting, it makes no sense to build expensive new infrastructure," said Benzar. "Their plan is far in excess of what is necessary to rehabilitate the area and will just add to the maintenance backlog. It's nuts."

Interested parties can comment about the appeal until September 30 to Regional Forester Rick Cables, P.O. Box 25127, Lakewood, CO 80225, rcables@fs.fed.us. Copies of the appeal can be obtained by calling Kitty Benzar at 970/259-4616 or Ron DeWitz at 970/387-5113.