

Recreation Fee Demonstration Program

USDA Forest Service

Investing in America's Great Outdoors

Contents: (May 2003)

- Fees are improving the land, facilities, and visitor services
- The Forest Service has listened and learned
- Research
- Accomplishments
- Cost of fee collection
- The Future: An integrated, simpler, and clearer program
- Frequently asked concerns and questions:
 - *Don't my taxes already pay the recreation bill?*
 - *Is the Forest Service turning forests over to the private sector?*
 - *Is the Forest Service allowing over-development of forests?*
 - *What is the relationship between timber, mining, and grazing fees and recreation fees?*
 - *Do Fee Demonstration projects have strategic plans for public involvement?*
 - *Is the fee program pricing people out of National Forests?*
 - *Is the Forest Service using fees to increase law enforcement numbers?*
 - *Why do I have to pay a fee in a wilderness area?*
 - *Can I use my Golden Eagle, Age, or Access Passport instead of paying the fee?*
 - *Are fees for recreation activities on federal lands new?*

More and more people recreate on National Forests each year, and keeping up with the needs of those visitors and natural resources is becoming more difficult. Seeing that National Forests, parks, and other federal lands were suffering from the lack of funding to care for these lands, Congress passed a law to test bringing more funds to these lands in a new way.

In 1996, Congress authorized the Recreation Fee Demonstration program (Fee Demo) through Public Law 104-134 (as amended: 16 United States Code 4601-6a), for the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The intent of the program is to test the application of recreation fees that are reinvested in recreation areas on federal lands and used to maintain and improve natural resources, recreation facilities, and services. The Forest Service is currently testing fees nationwide on 92 projects in 114 National Forests and Grasslands across 36 states and Puerto Rico. It is important to remember that the majority of National Forest system lands remain open and free to the public.

Public Law 106-291 extended authorization for the program through September 30, 2004, with revenues to remain available for use through September 30, 2007.

The Fee Demo program is a vital tool for land management agencies to use if the federal government is to continue to deliver quality recreation, heritage, and wilderness programs and services to the public. It allows the Forest Service to maintain facilities, trailheads and trails, campgrounds, picnic areas, cabins, visitor centers, lake and river access, and other areas to higher standards than is otherwise possible. It has opened up new opportunities to learning through Heritage expeditions, guided tours, web sites, and interpretive programs. It has provided for

visitor convenience through reservation services for camping, lodging, and permits. It has reduced litter, vandalism, crime, and enhanced security. It has improved communication with National Forest visitors, and learning about their recreation needs and desires.

As stewards of the land, Forest Service employees take their responsibility seriously. We encourage forest visitors to take responsibility for the impacts they have on the land as well. Recreation, heritage, and wilderness resources are priorities of the Forest Service and comprise one of four key agenda items to which the agency is committed.

Fees are improving the land, facilities, and visitor services

Demands for recreation opportunities on National Forests and Grasslands are increasing and becoming more complex. Forest visitors include more senior citizens, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, urban dwellers, and people with disabilities. Many forest recreation facilities are in dire need of repair, maintenance, and improvement to meet health and safety standards or face the consequences of closing. Other recreation services are being cut back, like the number of hours an interpretive center remains open. To meet demand while protecting the land, additional resources are needed in order to provide the quality recreation opportunities our visitors expect.

From the program's inception in 1996 through September 2002, the Forest Service has collected more than \$161.4 million in gross revenue. With these funds, we have maintained and improved campsites and facilities; installed trail and interpretive signs; expanded visitor services; repaired and maintained buildings and facilities, including thousands of miles of trail; increased public safety; improved parking areas; and maintained and upgraded restroom facilities.

The Forest Service has listened and learned

The Fee Demo authorizing legislation asked the participating agencies to test many different kinds of fees, and the Forest Service has done just that. The Forest Service took a creative approach to the fee program – encouraging the development of projects of varying sizes and fee types, differential pricing, and first-time fees for many activities, facilities, and services.

Initiation of fees has stirred some controversy and generated public and media interest. While most people accept user fees for reinvesting in recreation resources, there is also active opposition to the program. In some cases, the Forest Service is able to address concerns about program implementation, but a philosophical divide does exist over the issue of recreation fees.

We have listened and learned from our visitors, researchers, and interest groups. We know that people value:

- **Accountability:** Trust is built by sharing information on investments and performance. Annual reports to Congress, financial spreadsheets (both found on this Internet site), and local efforts like collaborative meetings, signs, reports, news stories, and flyers can provide information on enhancements made possible through the program;
- **Benefits:** Fees provide extra benefits in services and/or facilities that might not otherwise be possible, including enhanced public health and safety, and;
- **Convenience:** Making it as easy to comply with fee requirements so that the recreation experience is enjoyable.

Throughout the nation, we have modified projects to address visitor needs and local concerns. For example:

- Beginning in April, 2003, the Forest Service began accepting the national Federal Golden Eagle, Golden Age, and Golden Access Passports at most of our day-use fee sites (see additional information on the "Passes and Permits" section of this site). This provides new benefits for those who recreate frequently on different Federal lands, providing a more convenient and seamless payment option. Local and regional passes are still available for those with different recreation desires.
- Many Forest Service fee sites offer free days throughout the year for those who do not wish to pay a fee.
- Free annual passes are made available in many places to volunteers who contribute toward National Forest stewardship.
- The Forest Service provides a variety of ways to conveniently pay fees, by developing annual passes, making passes available at many retail outlets as well as through the Internet, by mail order, and via toll-free numbers. Automated fee machines have been installed at many high-use field locations.
- We have reduced multiple fees by working with adjacent Federal and non-Federal recreation providers to accept one pass at multiple sites, broadening where the national Golden Passports are accepted, limiting the different number of fees, and eliminating some fee sites.
- Communication is vitally important to the success of any fee program. While national consistency is important, local flexibility to meet local needs is equally so. All new fee proposals go through a business planning process that includes communication with visitors and communities of interest and place. A Civil Rights Impact analysis is conducted to identify and mitigate concerns to underrepresented populations.

Research

The Forest Service is tracking public responses to the fee demonstration program in many ways, often at the individual project level. Although actual questions asked vary from site to site, responses to questions about the acceptance of fees are generally positive. The following table summarizes general findings from analyses of public surveys, national comment cards, and a random-sample of 109 newspapers around the country since 1996. This site also contains a bibliography to many fee research articles.

Based on survey results, the public accepts recreation fees, especially when they see direct benefits to the site where they've paid fees and when payment is easy. Where fees are new, or where they are differ from common types, the public is less accepting of fees. More time may be required to gain public trust and acceptance where fees are new or different.

Survey Location	General Opinions About Fees
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	Positive	Negative
Boundary Waters Canoe Area	87%	13%
Southern California National Forests	64%	18%
Vail Pass Winter Recreation Area	46%	22%
Desolation Wilderness	64-78%	22-36%
White Mountain National Forest	68-72%	15-16%
Cataract Lake Fee Area	64%	14%
Tonto National Forest	55-64%	22-26%
National Comment Cards	62%	38%
News Article Analysis	65%	35%
<u>Los Angeles Times</u> Survey (natl.)	51%	42%

Accomplishments

From the program's inception in 1996 through September 2002, the Forest Service has invested \$128 million, or 80% of the revenue collected, in the categories shown in the table below. The remaining \$40.9 million, or 20%, will carry over for use in future years. See the Interagency Annual Report to Congress for more information.

Expense Category	Amount	% Total
Fee Collection	\$22,941,356	18%
Repairs & Maintenance	\$28,875,197	22.6%
Interpretation & Signing	\$15,402,958	12%
Facility Enhancement	\$8,167,305	8.4%
Resource Preservation and Enhancement	\$4,995,968	3.9%
Visitor Services and Operation	\$36,611,135	28.6%

46.6%

Security and Enforcement	\$5,065,108	4%
Inter-Agency Transfers	\$458,629	0.4%
Other	\$2,639,778	2.1%
Total Expenditures	\$127,995,560	100.0%

Below are several specific examples of the ways in which recreation fees are used to improve recreation experiences around the nation, from fiscal year 2002:



Accomplishments in Facility Enhancement

In Dakota Prairie Grasslands campgrounds in North Dakota, Fee Demo receipts paid for accessibility upgrades for persons with disabilities, new restrooms, new campfire rings, and additional picnic tables. Some of the labor for these enhancements was donated by youth enrolled in the Casey Foundation, a nonprofit organization offering direct services to children. The kids were introduced to good work habits and resource conservation; the Forest Service provided the tools, materials, logistical support, and supervision.

- Campers to the Coronado National Forest in Arizona now have additional benches, animal-proof trash containers, and lantern holders.
- A wheelchair accessible ramp provides better access to a courtesy dock and marina slips in the Flaming Gorge National Scenic Area in Utah (Ashley National Forest).
- A new boardwalk was constructed from the North Kawishiwi River to Clear Lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota (Superior National Forest).

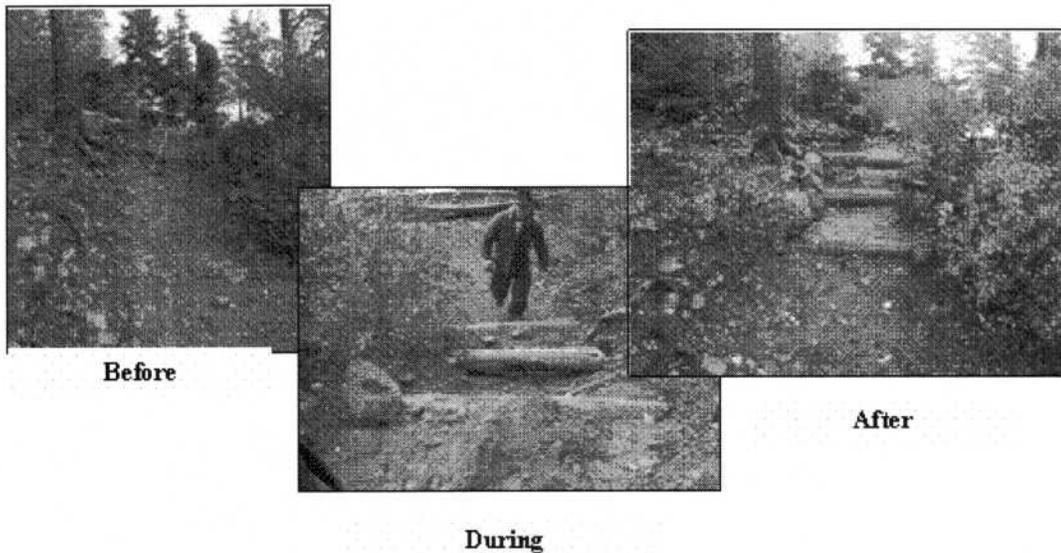
Accomplishments in Maintenance

- Both recurring and deferred maintenance are important elements that the Fee Demo program supports. In Sedona, Arizona (Coconino National Forest), Fee Demo funds paid for the removal of 22,296 pounds of garbage and an additional 19 abandoned vehicles. Forest employees also greeted half a million visitors, repaired or replaced 144 signs, gave 66 interpretive programs, removed 164 unnecessary fire rings and 39 transient camps, and maintained 42 miles of trail.
- The Bessey Recreation Complex on the Nebraska NF repaired and painted a swimming facility and bathhouse (a long-overdue deferred maintenance need).
- The Bitterroot Forest in Montana used Fee Demo funds from the Recreation Lodging program to restore the Gird Point Lookout (left). Almost like new, it will become available for rent to



the public in 2003. "Camping" in lookouts is becoming quite popular as visitors are increasingly attracted to lookout facilities because of their unique history and great scenery.

- The Prescott Forest in Arizona replaced the safety railing on Granite Basin Lake Dam. Originally installed when the dam was built in 1939, the railing was destroyed by flooding in 1983.
- Fishing enthusiasts in Alabama's National Forests now have use of a new fishing pier that replaced a dilapidated one, and hunters appreciate new information boards and signs at the Uchee Range.
- The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in Wisconsin regularly groomed 91 miles of cross-country ski trails and installed 20 new ski trail intersection signs. To facilitate access, Forest Service employees also plowed 9 parking lots.
- The Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee made major campground improvements, including toilet replacement, rehabilitating 34 campsites, repairing or replacing 39 tables, 44 grills, 20 lantern posts, 5 structures re-roofed, repairing two lift stations, and installing 79 bear-proof trash cans.



Trails were reconstructed on the Superior National Forest in Minnesota (see photos above), including removal of over 700 downed or hazardous trees.

- The Olympic National Forest in Washington completed maintenance on 47 miles of trails that had been deferred for 8 years.

Accomplishments in Resource Preservation and Enhancement

- On the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire, the Youth Conservation Corps obliterated riparian zone campsites at dispersed camping areas and installed 400 feet of

erosion control.

- Construction of a river take-out site on the Nantahala River (National Forests of North Carolina) accomplished many objectives. By replacing a constantly eroding gravel surface with asphalt, sedimentation of the river was significantly reduced. Fish are happier because their water is cleaner. More than 150,000 river users are happier because their vehicles and gear are less muddy.

Accomplishments in Security and Enforcement

- For years, graffiti vandals have plagued a gang hangout on the Cleveland National Forest in southern California. A contractor was hired with Fee Demo funds to restore the natural rock surfaces. Graffiti Rock has been "graffiti-free" for more than 8 months.
- Forest Service employees at Mt. Shasta (Shasta-Trinity NF) in California participated in 29 Search and Rescue operations, installed new weather instruments for avalanche forecasting, and taught 10 avalanche safety courses in California and Oregon.
- Damaged and deteriorated warning buoys were replaced and new buoys added at Cave Run and Laurel River Lakes on the Daniel Boone Forest in Tennessee. Mountain rescue gear and security cameras were also purchased.
- The Mendenhall Visitor Center in Juneau, Alaska (Tongass National Forest) installed a perimeter and motion sensing alarm system and upgraded surveillance cameras around/in the recreation complex.

Accomplishments in Interpretation and Signing

- In the Hudson-Meng Bison Bone Bed Visitor Center in northwestern Nebraska, youth participated in an excavation program called "Archaeologist For a Day". Children visiting the area can take a tour and learn how archaeologists work. Then the children get to excavate a mock dig area with all the tools. At the end of a two-hour session, each child receives a certificate of accomplishment. Fee Demo funds pay for the site interpreter.
- Other interpretation and signing accomplishments included resumption of campground interpretive programs on the Clearwater National Forest in Idaho in partnership with the Idaho Humanities Council. These popular "fireside chats" had disappeared in the early 1990s due to lack of funding.

Accomplishments in Visitor Services and Operations

- The Fee Demo Project at the Begich, Boggs Visitor Center in Alaska includes a modest fee for the movie "Voices from the Ice." Fees are only assessed from Memorial Day through the end of September (when 92% of all visits occur), allowing local visitors and others to visit for free during the winter.
- The Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania

increased visitor contact by 95% on their off-highway vehicle trails, they produced new and improved trail maps and brochures and increased frontline information for trail riders.

- The Wasatch-Cache National Forest in Utah hired a seasonal employee to maintain the water systems at 14 campgrounds.
- The El Portal Visitor Center in Puerto Rico implemented a special visitor package for low-income education groups.
- To minimize the impacts of on-site fuelwood gathering, campers to Canyon Creek (Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison NFs) in Colorado receive a free bundle of firewood with their purchase of a camping permit.
- In the Heather Meadows area of the Mt. Baker – Snoqualmie National Forest in Washington, those wishing to find "the perfect Christmas tree" were given the opportunity to start their search a week earlier and in advance of winter storms that make travel difficult. Road access was also improved to new cutting areas.

Heritage Expeditions

- The Willamette Forest in Oregon offered 4 Heritage Expeditions. Participants in the *Obsidian Cliff HE* monitored cultural resources and conducted specialized cultural resource inventory, including GPS mapping of ancient tool-making tools and other data collection.



Another expedition initiated *Honorary CCC Company 2002*, a group of local high school students working to restore several historic sites, including Longbow and the old Santiam Wagon Road. CCC "alumni" joined the group as advisors and shared the unique history of the CCC era. The expedition concluded with the fifth annual CCC Alumni Picnic. South Santiam Services, Inc. and the Portland Chapter of CCC Alumni were partners in this event. Supplies for the restoration work were purchased using dollars generated by Fee Demo Heritage Expeditions in previous years.

- The *Coast to Crest* expedition followed Native American trade routes from the Oregon Coast to the Crest of the Cascades. Partners included the Siuslaw National Forest, Oregon State Parks, Confederated Tribes of the Siletz and Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde.
- The fourth expedition, *Trekking the Old Santiam Wagon Road*, explored a major trade route between the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon. Trekkers relived the 1859 Wiley party expedition that followed the Indian trail that eventually became the Santiam Wagon Road.
- In addition to these multi-day expeditions, the Forest offered daylong Heritage Hikes excursions, held monthly from June to September, explored Sand Mt., Tidbits Mt., Trapper's Butte, and South Pyramid.

Matching Funds and Volunteers

On the Caribou-Targhee National Forests in Idaho, three new wheelchair accessible restrooms were installed in the Emigration Campground using \$3000 in Fee Demo as a match for a \$39,000 grant (a leverage of 1430%). Another \$500 matched an \$8000 grant to install accessible ramps.

In southern California, more than 4,500 volunteers made \$4,000,000 in service, repair and maintenance contributions. Of those, 550 volunteers received annual Adventure Passes in recognition of at least 100 hours of volunteer service.

At the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area on the Siuslaw National Forest in Oregon, Fee Demo provided \$42,000 in match dollars for an Off Highway Vehicle grant (\$109,000) to manage riding areas. Elsewhere on the forest, Fee Demo Provided grant match (\$45,000) to obtain \$365,000 of ODOT Scenic Byway funds for redesign and



Visitors get assistance from the Hart's Pass Guard Station on the Okanogan NF (WA)

reconstruction of Devils Churn wayside on Highway 101.

Cost of fee collection

Collecting fees costs money, and there are many costs associated with implementing a new project in the first year or two. Collection personnel, collection equipment and supply, printing, signing, compliance patrol, collection stations, and cash handling and accounting expenses associated with a fee demo project must be paid. By the third year, as initial start-up costs fade and collection efficiency improves, these costs generally decline as a percentage of gross revenue.

Collection costs fell remarkably from 45% of gross revenue in fiscal year 1997, with the implementation of many new projects, to 17% in 1998. Though they have since fluctuated

somewhat (to nearly 21% in 1999) with start-up costs and low initial revenue on new projects, wildland fires, and significant weather events, these costs are currently about 17% of gross revenue.

The Future: An integrated, simpler, clearer program

Our key objective now is to better integrate fees and the fee program around the country, both within the agency and with other agencies that charge recreation fees. We are working on ways to increase national consistency of the program while maintain local integrity. Some of these improvements are in standardized processes, consolidating fees where appropriate, improving communication with the public, establishing criteria for charging fees, and continuing to listen, learn and change.

Frequently asked questions

Don't my taxes already pay the recreation bill?

In fact, of every dollar in the federal budget, only a small percentage of a penny goes toward the entire Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Resources budget for the Forest Service. Appropriated dollars cover only a part of the total need. Recreation depends on volunteers, partnerships, concessionaires, and others to help make up the difference. Funding shortfalls still exist.

As recreation use continues to climb, impacts from visitors continue to take a toll on natural resources and facilities. Whether on foot, on horseback, off-highway vehicle or snowmobile, whether climbing or whitewater rafting, all of these activities create some impact or damage to the land. Those who recreate on National Forests have a special responsibility.

Is the Forest Service turning forests over to the private sector?

The Recreation Fee Demonstration program actually helps ensure that federal agencies remain the managers of public lands. Under the program, fees are retained in the place in which they are collected to be used for improvements and maintenance of the land, facilities, and services. With reductions in workforce as forest budgets shrink, an important strategy to keep facilities open has been to permit concessionaires to run campgrounds and other facilities with their workforce. This has been the best option in many places for keeping those facilities open for the public to enjoy. This works well in some places, although not everywhere.

The Recreation Fee Demonstration program helps the Forest Service clear trails and clean campgrounds or to contract with the private sector for those services.

In managing National Forests and Grasslands, the Forest Service works with many partners to provide the best services possible to the public. These partners include volunteers, non-profit organizations and other non-governmental organizations, other agencies and governments, and the private sector where it is appropriate.

Is the Forest Service allowing over-development of forests?

The Forest Service offers a range of recreation opportunities, from very rugged and undeveloped

wilderness to developed campgrounds for recreational vehicles. Use of the land is largely determined through the forest planning process. By law, the public must be included in the process of developing these plans.

Congress has designated over 35 million acres within National Forests as "wilderness areas". Over 18% of National Forest lands are preserved as wilderness, and use of those lands is restricted by law. In addition, use of Wild and Scenic Rivers and certain other lands are specially designated by Congress are also restricted from development.

What is the relationship between timber, mining, and grazing fees and recreation fees?

The Forest Service is a "multiple use" agency, by law. This means the agency's mission is complex and includes mining, timber harvesting, and grazing, in addition to recreation, wilderness, and wildlife and fish management. Hunting and fishing are also allowed on National Forests and Grasslands. Congress sets the fees for timber, mining, and grazing. Congress authorized the Recreation Fee Demonstration program to help address the growing need for additional resources for maintenance and improvement of recreation facilities and services on federal lands.

Do Fee Demonstration projects have strategic plans for public involvement?

All Recreation Fee Demonstration projects must have business and communication plans, approved at higher levels of the organization. We recognize that this program will work only if we work with local communities and the recreating public. Fees are set with input from the public through either cost recovery or fair market valuation methods. The public is also involved in setting priorities for uses of fee revenue. Business plans are in place to spell out objectives of the program, establish how fees are set, how revenue is spent, and what kinds of project monitoring will take place. These plans can change over time as we learn more about what works.

Is the fee program pricing people out of forests?

Part of the demonstration program is to learn how fees can have the least impact on non-traditional users of forests and people of low income. Project managers have worked hard to price passes reasonably and to have different pricing options. Most projects offer daily passes and annual passes that offer significant savings for use over a year, and most projects offer volunteer passes to reward official volunteer work.

A "national civil rights impact analysis" is a study of fee management practices on National Forests and their impacts on participation by low-income populations, American Indians, elderly people on fixed incomes, and people of color. Each project is required to prepare a civil rights impact analysis to monitor use by certain populations and develop activities that would reduce the impacts of recreation fees on these populations.

Is the Forest Service using fees to increase law enforcement numbers?

As of September 2002, about 4% of total revenue has been spent on law enforcement. These expenses primarily address public safety and resource protection and should not be confused with the costs associated with fee compliance, which are considered "collection costs". Although some law enforcement functions are critical to the success of the Recreation Fee Demonstration

program, law enforcement officers also perform other important functions, such as crime prevention and investigation, assisting stranded visitors, and even saving lives.

Monitoring and enforcing fee compliance is critical to equity and fairness in the Fee Demonstration program. The agency continues to address complaints from users who have paid about those who have not. At most projects, people who haven't paid a required fee are given at least one chance to comply before a fine is attached. Our goal is 100% compliance, which means that everyone who visits the site or project to recreate pays the fee.

Why do I have to pay a fee in a wilderness area?

We are charging fees in wilderness areas where the resource is fragile or where impacts from human use are high, and to manage the permitting system where use must be regulated. Wilderness areas, like other National Forest lands, must be protected and maintained, although in different ways and to different standards than elsewhere.

Can I use my Golden Eagle, Age, or Access card instead of paying the fee?

In many cases, yes. The Golden Passports are now accepted at many more Forest Service fee sites, charging fees for entrance into federal recreation areas and developed day-use recreation sites (such as picnic sites, trailheads, visitor centers, parking) and areas of high public use that may not be highly developed. In addition, Golden Age and Golden Access Passports offer a 50% discount for facilities and services like camping, highly developed swimming areas and boat launches, and tours for which "use" fees are collected. The Golden Eagle Passport is not accepted at these use-fee areas.

Are fees for recreation activities on federal lands new?

Fees have been in place on public lands for many years under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act and other authorities. Under these authorities, land management agencies have charged for many activities, including entrance to National Parks, National Monuments, National Historic Sites, National Recreation Areas, and National Wildlife Refuges, as well as for facilities and services, such as camping, swimming, parking, boat launches, and tours. In the past, most of these fees have gone directly to the Federal Treasury. Unlike traditional fees, those collected under the Fee Demonstration program are largely retained by the project or site. The Forest Service decided to test many new kinds of fees at sites and for services that have historically had no fees. Other land management agencies under this program have increased their existing fees.

Expires: 2004