

Controversy grows over Forest Service fees

Jane Stebbins

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SUMMIT COUNTY - Kitty Benzar is waiting for a phone call from Summit County.

Benzar is a member of the Norwood-based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition (WSNFC), an organization formed to combat the U.S. Forest Service's fee demonstration program.

The program was implemented in 1996 to offset impacts on the forest and improve amenities for visitors. Many said they would only support the program if the bulk of the money went to improvements in the area in which it was collected.

The WSNFC says the Forest Service shouldn't charge the fees because taxpayers already pay for use of public lands. Additionally, Benzar said, the fees have generated more animosity - rather than less - between user groups in various parts of the country.

Jackson and Pitkin counties just joined the state Legislature and nine other counties - La Plata, Montezuma, San Juan, San Miguel, Gunnison, Saguache, Rio Grande, Hinsdale and Mineral - in opposition to the program. Also, Ouray County has managed to get the program removed from Yankee Boy Basin, where the Forest Service was charging fees to people using county roads.

The trial program was supposed to expire after two years, but legislators have reauthorized its extension throughout the years - most recently on an appropriations rider through Dec. 31, 2005. Other legislation is pending that would allow the program to expire in the Forest Service, BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service.

Howard Scott, who administers the summer program in Summit County, thinks the program will become permanent after its current run ends.

Program alive in Summit

Western Slope No-Fee Coalition officials say recreationalists at Vail Pass are increasingly angry about the Fee Demo Program in place there and at various other locations. Forest Service officials, however, say users are generally happy with the program, as long as they can see the improvements the money is going toward. Thursday, with no attendant at the collection area, most visitors drive right past the booth.



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Benzar thinks Eagle County will be next in joining the opposition - and she hopes Summit County will follow in its footsteps.

"No county has ever turned us down," she said. "But it takes a bit of legwork. You have to get on the county commissioner agenda, get speakers, and convince commissioners. It's easier for someone who lives nearby to do that."

Summit County is home to nine summer fee stations, including Cataract, Surprise and Eaglesmere trailheads, the Cataract Lake, Davis Springs, Elliot Creek, and Willows campgrounds and the Cow Creek North and Cow Creek South areas at Green Mountain Reservoir.

There also is a winter recreation fee demo program at Vail Pass, an area popular with both motorized and non-motorized backcountry users.

People arriving by vehicle are charged a \$5 entrance fee, of which 95 percent stays in the area to pay for toilet maintenance, bathroom cleaning, trash service, a law enforcement officer, a fee collection officer and two maintenance employees.

Scott said people support the fees as long as they can see benefits.

"It's one of the more popular programs," he said. "When it becomes permanent, it should evolve into a project that everyone can enjoy and support."

The Forest Service is trying to create a statewide or regional pass program so people won't have to pay each visit.

Adding to contentious atmosphere

Benzar said management practices haven't worked to alleviate conflict between user groups, notably motorized and non-motorized forest users.

"There are spontaneous revolts breaking out everywhere," Benzar said. "Vail Pass is heating up. It isn't working. It's adding to the whole atmosphere of conflict that already prevails there. People get out of their car into a CDOT rest area, they're confronted with information about where they can't go or what they can't do. They start off P.O.'d, then you charge them money for the privilege and they're more P.O.'d."

"People have a better attitude when they feel they have ownership in the land than when they have to pay an entrance fee," she continued. "All of a sudden it's someone else's job keep you on the trail, pick up your trash. It's more like visiting Disneyland than some place you own. "

Some users, she said, seek out other, less popular areas, thus spreading the environmental

problems around.

"We're definitely hearing about that on Vail Pass," Benzar said. "People are saying they're seeing more snowmobile traffic on their county roads because people are trying to avoid Vail Pass."

It's not just the environmental sector complaining about the fees, either.

"The motorized community hates this just as much," she said. "Our biggest successes have always happened when we've had bipartisan support."

Benzar would prefer to work with the Forest Service on issues pertaining to the forest, but the program pits users against agencies, she said.

And she doesn't like legislators "stealing" Forest Service monies for other projects.

"They shouldn't take money budgeted for recreation or maintenance, budget it for different things and leave district rangers strapped for cash," Benzar said. "We consider this a crutch and a long-term problem. They're not seeing the bigger picture."

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