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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 20, 2004

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BLM Abandons Backcountry User Fee Plan For Escalante-Grand Staircase National Monument

At a meeting of the Advisory Committee for Escalante-Grand Staircase National Monument on April 19th in Kanab, Utah, the BLM announced that they will not be implementing user fees for overnight camping under the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo).

The move comes in response to growing local opposition, including a resolution opposing the fees by the nearby City of Escalante. Monument manager Dave Hunsaker, who had written in December that "One potential idea that has surfaced is to institute a Monument-wide fee for overnight camping (hiking and car camping)..." decided not to ask the Advisory Committee to consider that idea. Instead, fees will continue only for the two developed campgrounds at Calf Creek and Deer Creek. While a discussion of increasing fees at these campgrounds had also taken place the previous week, at the end of the meeting, no fee increases for those areas were proposed, either.

Erica Walz, of Escalante, spoke at the meeting to oppose the expanded fees. Although pleased that the scheme has been dropped for now, Walz questioned why the monument has a standing Fee Demo advisory subcommittee in place when there are no fees proposals to discuss.

"Clearly, something has happened between the time the Fee Demo advisory body was established, and now," she said. "We think the locals have had a big impact, and we've been heard as far as Washington."

Another Escalante fee opponent, Gwendolyn Zeta, expressed concern about the BLM's recent decision to increase the penalty for failure to pay Fee Demo fees from \$100 to \$5,000. "The local officials may have no plans to go that far right now, but it seems like an awfully big hammer to put in place if they aren't planning to use it at some time in the future."

In other Fee Demo activity, the Senate Public Lands and Forests Subcommittee will hold Fee Demo oversight hearings on April 21st. A Senate bill that would allow fee authority

to expire in the Forest Service, BLM, and Fish & Wildlife Service (S.1107) was passed unanimously in Committee but has not yet been scheduled for a floor vote. In the House, hearings are scheduled for May 6th on HR 3283, which would establish permanent access fees for all federal lands, increase the penalty for non-payment to a Class B Misdemeanor, and abolish the Golden Age Pass for seniors, among other provisions.

Walz thinks that local opposition, current activities in Congress on Fee Demo, and possibly even the presidential elections are affecting the decision not to establish new fees right now. "We think that Monument managers and the Department of Interior are biding their time, waiting for a better moment. What's most important right now is that Fee Demo be killed, so that moment doesn't arrive."

Fee Demo was originally passed as a two-year trial project in 1996. It since been extended several times and is now set to expire December 31, 2005.