

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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US SENATE PASSES PARKS-ONLY FEE DEMO BILL

Proponents of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) were dealt a major blow on Wednesday, May 19, when the U.S. Senate unanimously passed S.1107, which would allow the program to expire in the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service on its scheduled expiration date of December 31, 2005.

The bill would allow only the National Park Service to charge entrance fees and retain them within the agency instead of paying them into general federal revenues.

On the vast, mostly undeveloped acreage managed by the other three agencies, fees have met with passionate opposition by Americans of all recreational interests, from OHV enthusiasts to wilderness advocates. Today they were celebrating the Senate vote as a major milestone in their goal of ending public land access fees.

“We are thrilled that the members of the Senate recognized that Americans can tell the difference between the National Parks and our other public lands. We especially thank Senators Craig Thomas (R-WY) and Larry Craig (R-ID) for their leadership on this issue,” said Robert Funkhouser, President of the Colorado-based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. “Their continued support of public ownership of public lands has been crucial to this successful outcome in the Senate.”

The Senate vote stands in stark contrast to Fee Demo’s uncertain future in the House. On May 6, the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands held hearings on HR 3283, sponsored by Rep. Ralph Regula (R-OH). That bill would impose a requirement on all visitors to any federally managed land to purchase a national pass called the America the Beautiful Pass. Anyone caught on Park Service, Forest Service, BLM, Fish and Wildlife, or Bureau of Reclamation land without the pass could be charged with a Class B Misdemeanor, punishable by up to \$5,000 and/or 6 months in jail. The bill would also eliminate the Golden Age Pass, a \$10 lifetime pass currently available to seniors that covers National Parks entrance fees.

House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo (R-CA) has indicated that he plans to move a bill this session to settle the future of Fee Demo one way or another. Whether it will be

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HR 3283 or S.1107, which now goes to the House, is unclear. The debate in the House over the program's future appears to be wide open.

Anti-fee activists like Funkhouser are certain that the passage of S.1107 will tilt the balance against Fee Demo. "The Senate has stood up loud and clear in defense of Americans' right to access their own land without being taxed twice" he said. "We are hopeful that the House will do the same."