

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

UTAH COUNTY CALLS FOR AN END TO FEE DEMO Commission Opposes House Bill Creating Permanent Public Lands Fees

Citing double taxation and negative effects on tourism among other reasons, the San Juan County, Utah, Board of County Commissioners has taken a strong stand against the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) and passed a resolution calling for its abolition. At a public meeting in Monticello on June 21, the Commissioners also went on record opposing Ohio Congressman Ralph Regula's bill, HR3283, which would implement permanent access fees on all public lands.

San Juan County's resolution is the second in Utah and joins dozens of similar statements by elected bodies nationally. The City of Escalante recently passed a resolution that succeeded in heading off a fee scheme at nearby Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. In Colorado, thirteen towns and counties, as well as the state legislature, are on record against Fee Demo, as are numerous jurisdictions in California, Arizona, and the Pacific Northwest. State legislatures officially opposed to Fee Demo are Colorado, Oregon, California, and New Hampshire.

San Juan County's resolution reads in part, "Recreational fees constitute double taxation and bear no relationship to the actual costs of recreation such as hiking, picnicking, observing wildlife, or scenic driving on state and county roads and public rights of way." It goes on to state, "The concept of paying Recreational Fee Demonstration Program Fees to use public lands is contrary to the idea that public lands belong to the American people and are places where everyone is granted access and is welcome, a concept that has been and should remain in place."

The resolution concludes, "Be it Resolved by the Board of Commissioners of San Juan County, that the Board of Commissioners for San Juan County, Utah oppose the legislation known as HR 3283. That the Board of Commissioners strongly recommends that the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program be abolished and Congress restore the funding necessary to manage public land agencies (including operations and maintenance costs) within Utah and that no recreational fees be imposed on federal lands within San Juan County under the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program."

According to County Planner Ed Scherick, San Juan County is 92% public and tribal lands. The federal lands are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, The Forest Service and the Park Service. Fee Demo sites there include Cedar Mesa/Grand Gulch, a backcountry area mostly accessible only on foot or horseback. Since 1999, hikers have been charged \$2 per person per day or \$8 per overnight trip to enter the remote canyons. The BLM is also considering charging for access to other public lands in San Juan County such as Indian Creek and Dark Canyon Wilderness.

"Fee Demo was originally intended by Congress to help with maintenance backlogs," said Western Slope No-Fee Coalition co-founder Kitty Benzar. "But at Cedar Mesa, there is little infrastructure and no maintenance backlog. This is nothing but an entry fee to visit undeveloped lands that we already own and pay taxes to maintain. The BLM is running Cedar Mesa/Grand Gulch as a business, using our public lands as their working capital. The WSNFC is pleased that San Juan County recognized this and has taken such a strong position."

Fee Demo is a controversial program that was authorized in 1996 as a two-year demonstration allowing the land management agencies to charge for access and use of public lands that were previously free. It has since been extended five times and is currently due to expire on December 31, 2005.

San Juan County's action comes as the U.S. House of Representatives Resources Committee is expected to move HR 3283, which would make fees permanent, to a Committee vote soon. Its main sponsor, Congressman Ralph Regula (R-OH), has reportedly been twisting the arms of western members of the House Resources Committee to pass this legislation. Regula's congressional district has no federal public lands.

If passed, HR3283 would require Americans to pay a fee before they set foot or tire on any of 640 million acres of public lands. It would establish a National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass called the "America the Beautiful Pass." The pass would be required for access to lands administered by the BLM, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Corps of Engineers, and Bureau of Reclamation, in addition to the Park Service. Indications are that the cost of this new public lands access pass would be at least \$85 annually and could be much higher.

The bill would also establish several layers of fees. "Basic" fees would be charged for general access as well as for visitor centers, dispersed use areas, backcountry use, roads, pulloffs, scenic overlooks, drinking fountains, restrooms, picnic tables, and parking lots. "Expanded" fees would apply to developed facilities like campgrounds and boat launch ramps.

The Regula bill would also eliminate the Golden Age Pass, a lifetime National Parks pass currently available to our seniors for a one-time fee of \$10. Seniors would have to purchase an America the Beautiful Pass annually.

Under the bill, the penalty for being on any federally managed public land without a pass would be up to \$5,000 and/or 6 months in jail. Penalties would apply to the registered owner of a vehicle, regardless of whether they are the person driving it, and to all occupants equally with the owner and/or driver. The agencies would be authorized to presume guilt if no pass was displayed, instead of having to prove that none was purchased.

“HR 3283 is an outrage and an insult to the American public that owns these lands and has paid taxes to maintain them through two World Wars and the Great Depression,” said Robert Funkhouser, President of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. “Allowing the land management agencies to appropriate their own funds without congressional oversight puts an unfair burden on the American taxpayer. It is a double tax.

“The agencies’ own research has determined that the program discriminates against lower income and working Americans, and the General Accounting Office has determined that it is costing over 50% of the fee revenue just to collect the fees and administer the program,” added Funkhouser.

“Congressman Regula, with Administration support, is trying to push this down America’s throat. It is a sad day when someone so hostile to rural and western values can rise to such a position of power in Washington that he actually might be able to make this happen.”

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition is a broad-based group consisting of motorized and non-motorized recreational interests, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, elected officials and just plain citizens. It has members and supporting organizations in 35 states and the military, and has worked for over three years to end Fee Demo. The WSNFC encourages more oversight and accountability in the land management agencies, and encourages Congress to fund public lands adequately through the regular appropriations process.

HR 3283 can be read online at:

<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:HR3283>: