

# WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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

RIDGWAY, CO. Citing negative effects on tourism among other reasons, the Ouray County, Colorado, 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 Ridgway on July 26, the Commissioners also went on record opposing Ohio Congressman Ralph Regula's bill, HR 3283, which would implement permanent access fees on all public lands.

Ouray County's resolution joins dozens of similar statements by elected bodies nationally, including twelve counties in Colorado and numerous jurisdictions in California, Arizona, and the Pacific Northwest. State legislatures officially opposed to Fee Demo are Colorado, Oregon, California, and New Hampshire.

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 for recreation. It has since been extended five times and is currently due to expire on December 31, 2005.

In 2001 and 2002, Ouray County was a center of Fee Demo opposition when the Forest Service started charging an access fee for Yankee Boy Basin, a popular four-wheel drive, OHV, and hiking area. Non-compliance with the fee requirement was widespread, and there were three organized protests. The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition (WSNFC), now a national leader against Fee Demo, originated with the Yankee Boy protests.

In 2003, the Ouray Commissioners initiated a new management strategy for the area that eliminated the access fee. A partnership between a local non-profit, the Forest Service,

and the County now provides on-the-ground presence to educate visitors and encourage appropriate land use. The non-profit, dubbed the Yankee Boy Regional Conservation Association, is funded by voluntary, tax-deductible donations. It recruits and organizes the volunteers, while the Forest Service continues to charge a fee for camping, which funds toilet facilities and ranger patrols. At status meetings with the Forest Service, the Commissioners have expressed satisfaction that this management approach is meeting their goals in a more popular and less controversial way than the access fee did.

The WSNFC requested the Ouray resolution because of legislation pending in the U.S. House of Representatives that would expand Fee Demo and make it permanent. The bill, HR 3283, would require visitors to any of the 640 million acres of public land to purchase an “America the Beautiful Pass.” Failure to have a pass would be 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 lifetime National Parks pass currently available to seniors for a one-time charge of \$10.

“This bill, sponsored by a congressman from Ohio who has no public land in his district, would make criminals out of taxpayers,” said WSNFC spokesperson Kitty Benzar. “Here in the West, it would be a crime to leave the city limits without a pass. These resolutions, by elected bodies at all levels, help convince Congress to preserve our priceless heritage of public access to public land, and we applaud Ouray County for taking this step.”

The House Resources Committee is expected to move HR 3283 to a Committee vote soon. Its main sponsor, Ralph Regula (R-OH), has reportedly been twisting the arms of western members of the House Resources Committee to vote for its passage.

The Ouray County resolution states, “That the Board of Commissioners for Ouray County, Colorado strongly recommends that the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program be abolished and that any legislation to extend it or make it permanent, such as HR 3283 currently pending in the U.S. House of Representatives, be opposed by the Colorado Congressional Delegation...”

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:](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:HR3283)