

DENVER POST

Editorial Section

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Around here, and indeed in every mountain town I've spent much time in, there's a not-so-funny joke that you take half your pay in scenery. Local wages may not be much in cash terms, but you're near thousands of acres of public land where you can hike, hunt, fish, camp, kayak, hang-glide, shoot, meditate or otherwise engage in the pursuit of happiness.

For years, we've taken this for granted, but now Congress has approved a way to cut the scenic portion of our wages - call it the first federal tax increase of the Bush administration.

For years, the National Park Service has charged admission to its sites. The Forest Service has charged fees for using developed campsites and the like, and that's fair enough - nobody pumps privies for free.

But general use of undeveloped public land, like hiking a trail, was always free. However, the 3,000-page Omnibus Spending Bill which passed Congress earlier this month contained a "rider" which gives federal land agencies - the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Fish and Wildlife Service, etc. - the permanent authority to collect user fees.

The rider was the result of some back-room hustling by Rep. Ralph Regula, an Ohio Republican who has for years wanted to charge us to walk on our own land. He was the main mover behind the unpopular "fee demo" program that started a decade ago and kept getting renewed every two years.

I could not reach Regula to find out why he thinks I should pay \$5 or \$10 a day, with a \$5,000 fine and a six-month jail term if I don't pay the fee, just to walk across the river and up Cottonwood Gulch.

So we must guess at his reasons.

It can't be about money. The best estimates are that it will bring in about \$200 million a year - and hey, Halliburton can waste that much in Iraq in a day or two.

Regula's website shows that he's not some fiscal tightwad trying to improve federal finances; it teems with announcements like "Regula announces funding for Stark County education programs," "Regula provides \$3 million in funding for flood control projects," "Regula announces \$2 million for Beall Avenue restoration" and "Regula secures funding for Cuyahoga Valley National Park and the Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway."

So if it's not about financial prudence - this is a congressman who brags on bringing home the pork - what could it be about?

For one thing, even if this is a Congress dominated by Republicans who whine about how "decadent Hollywood values" and "degenerate music" are corrupting the moral fiber of the Republic, they also cater to the entertainment industry, as with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act and the Sonny Bono Copyright Act Extension.

That industry would much prefer we were paying to watch a movie or buying a CD, rather than engaging in some wholesome outdoor activity that we didn't pay for. Throw in the other industries which benefit from our sedentary recreational habits, everything from electric utilities to the medical complex, and there's a potent combination of campaign contributors, all with good monetary reasons to discourage walks in the woods.

Then there's the rural real-estate industry, which likes to advertise homes and homesites that "adjoin public land." This often means that local dishwashers and burger flippers clad in tattered Army-surplus gear and accompanied by their mongrel dogs - that is, the people getting much of their pay in scenery - are able to walk past \$2 million trophy homes.

This can't be good for property values, just letting anybody into the woods. The easiest way to keep the rabble out is to charge a fee, so that the freeloaders will find it easier to do something else, rather than impair the panoramic views of their betters.

That's going to be hard on some people, but we all have to make sacrifices to build the right kind of America - one that's a lot like Texas, where there is no public land to speak of.

Ed Quillen of Salida is a former newspaper editor whose column appears Tuesday and Sunday.