

# WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **“RAT” OUTRAGE GROWS IN WESTERN STATES**

A new fee scheme for recreational use of federally managed public lands has started a firestorm of opposition among Western elected officials. Known as the Recreational Access Tax, or RAT, the measure was buried as a rider in a 3,000-plus page appropriations bill in the waning days of the last congress.

Three Colorado counties have already called for repeal of the RAT, and the Montana State Legislature is fast-tracking a similar measure. Officials, especially in states with significant federal acreage, are outraged that a major change in public land policy was made behind closed doors, without congressional debate.

U.S. Representative Ralph Regula (R-OH), who has no federal public lands in his district, originally introduced the RAT, officially known as the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, as H.R. 3283. It allows the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Reclamation to charge fees for recreational use of vast tracts of federally managed land by the general public. H.R. 3283 passed the House Resources Committee on a voice vote in October but never passed the floor of the House and was never introduced into the Senate. It became law nevertheless by being attached as a rider on the huge Omnibus Appropriations Bill, which must pass in order to keep all government operations funded.

The RAT supersedes the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo). Fee Demo was originally a two-year test program but was repeatedly renewed and expanded and ran for eight years. Regula attached Fee Demo to the 1996 Omnibus Appropriations Bill as a rider, so that it, too, never was subjected to hearings or a vote on its own merits.

In Montana, the legislature is expected to approve House Joint Resolution 13. It asserts that “Montana’s culture, quality of life, and traditions demand free access to public lands” and goes on to say that “the Montana Legislature demands that H.R. 3283 be repealed by the United States Congress.” The House Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Committee held a hearing on HJR13 in Helena on February 10<sup>th</sup>, at which the Montana State Parks Foundation and the Governor’s office both testified in support. The resolution had over 55 co-sponsors, out of 150 legislators, before the hearing. After the hearing, every

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member of the Committee added his or her name as additional co-sponsors. The Committee is expected to refer the resolution to the House floor within a week.

Three Colorado Counties have already passed similar resolutions by unanimous votes. San Miguel County acted on January 14<sup>th</sup> with a measure that says “federal policies regarding management of public lands have a profound impact on the well-being of the citizens of Colorado and changes to them should be conducted in an open public forum.” On February 2<sup>nd</sup> Hinsdale County agreed, adding that “H.R. 3283 was never approved by the U.S. House and was never introduced, never had hearings, and was never approved by the U.S. Senate.”

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, La Plata County adopted a similar resolution, which will be sent to the Governor of Colorado, President Bush, House and Senate Leadership, and the entire Colorado Congressional Delegation.

Robert Funkhouser, President of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition and a leading opponent of Fee Demo, is pleased that elected officials are taking action. “The RAT fundamentally changes the way our public lands are funded and managed. It will have a disproportionate impact on poor and rural Americans, and will mean that all Americans will be treated as customers of the land management agencies instead of as the owners of the land. I hope that every elected body in the country calls for repeal of the RAT so that Congress will reconsider its approval of this misguided program.”

The WSNFC is actively pursuing additional resolutions from elected bodies nationwide.