

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

P.O. Box 135, Durango, CO 81302

970/259-4616

www.WesternSlopeNoFee.org

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For more information: Robert Funkhouser, 802/235-2299, rfunk9999@earthlink.net
Kitty Benzar, 970/259-4616, wsnfc@hotmail.com

FOREST SERVICE DROPS FEES AT ONLY FOUR OF OVER 300 SITES IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

**Fees will continue at Mt Evans, Vail Pass, Maroon Bells, and many other sites
despite restrictions in new law.**

On June 9th the Rocky Mountain Region of the U.S. Forest Service announced that it is discontinuing access fees at only four sites out of more than 300 that were previously under the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo). Fee Demo was discontinued in late 2004 and replaced by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, known to its opponents as the Recreation Access Tax, or RAT.

The RAT limits day-use fees to only developed sites that have improved parking areas, permanent toilets, picnic tables, permanent trash containers, interpretive displays, and security services. Entrance fees for National Forests and BLM lands are prohibited, as are fees just for driving through an area or for access to dispersed backcountry areas. The restrictions were intended to address some of the objections to the unlimited fees that were allowed under Fee Demo, which was due to expire at the end of 2005 and was increasingly unpopular nationwide.

Fee opponents point to the Region 2 announcement as proof that the federal agencies plan to continue most fees even though many of them have been rendered illegal under the new law. "Fees for trailhead parking are de facto backcountry use fees, and fees for roads are nothing but entrance fees in disguise," said Kitty Benzar, co-founder of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. "The Forest Service is thwarting the intent of Congress and flouting the letter of the law."

In Colorado, the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest is dropping their fee at the Granby Lake Overlook, but will continue to charge for use of at least sixteen other sites, including six trailheads, five picnic areas, and five boat launches. Although Department of Interior Assistant Secretary Lynn Scarlett testified to Congress in May that entrance fees have been discontinued for the Arapaho National Recreation Area, the Forest continues to collect fees at entrance stations on entrance roads. They have simply been re-named Recreation Use Fees. So although the Granby Lake Overlook is now free, a fee will still be collected for access to the lake itself.

On the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, which spans Colorado and Wyoming, fees will be dropped for two campgrounds and one picnic area but continued for at least 5 trailheads, 29 picnic areas, and 53 campgrounds.

At Mt. Evans in Colorado, the Forest Service will continue to charge for access to State Highway 5, a scenic drive that passes through part of the Arapaho National Forest and provides access to the backcountry for hikers and climbers. The Coalition contends that this fee should have been dropped because of the RAT's prohibition on fees merely for driving through an area, or for those who merely park and go hiking without using any facilities.

Recreation user fees will also continue at the Maroon Bells Wilderness near Aspen, and for winter parking at Vail Pass by snowmobilers, skiers, and snowshoers who access the backcountry from the CDOT parking area at the summit. Both fees violate the RAT's provision forbidding fees for backcountry use even if the backcountry trip originates from a developed trailhead, as long as the trailhead facilities are not used.

“There are over 300 former Fee Demo sites in the Rocky Mountain Region. They include dirt pullouts used for trailhead parking, picnic areas with no trash service, state and county roads that pass through National Forests, and dispersed camping areas with few or no services. To claim that only four of these sites do not comply with the new law is ridiculous,” said Benzar. “We estimate that as many as half of the fees in Region 2 are not in compliance with the conditions listed in the RAT.”

The RAT was buried in the omnibus spending bill for 2005. It was never passed by the U.S. House and was never introduced, had hearings, or voted on in the U. S. Senate. The state legislatures of Colorado, Montana, and Oregon, and the Alaska House, along with nine county and municipal governments, have already passed resolutions calling for repeal of the RAT.

The Coalition has launched a survey of fee sites to highlight abuses and identify illegal fees to Congress. Fee opponents are using Coalition-provided questionnaires to survey fee sites nationally and document which ones comply with the new law and which ones do not. Survey information and questionnaires can be obtained from feesitesurvey@hotmail.com or by calling 970/259-4616.