

Thursday, June 23, 2005

## Herald Poll:: The new entry fees in American Fork Canyon

PDF

| Print |

E-mail

---

Provo Daily Herald

This summer, Americans will find it cheaper to get on public land.

The recently passed Recreation Enhancement Act eliminates the entrance fees the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service charged to access federal lands, ending the nine-year-old fee demonstration project.

Unfortunately, you'll still have to pay to drive into American Fork Canyon or the Alpine Loop. Forest Service officials there claim the law doesn't apply to the area, and the fee has actually made it better for people to recreate there.

Under the new law, the Forest Service can only charge fees for developed areas that provide "significant opportunities for outdoor recreation," and have permanent toilet facilities, trash bins, interpretive signs, picnic tables or security devices.

The rangers watching over American Fork Canyon and the Alpine Loop said that covers the public lands under their jurisdiction.

This raises an important question: Should people have to pay money to use public land?

The government's philosophy has been to preserve these natural wonders "For the benefit and enjoyment of the people," as it says in the inscription over the archway at Yellowstone National Park. Public lands and forests are intended to be held in trust for all Americans, not just a privileged few, as the king's forests were in England.

It's not uncommon to pay a fee to camp in a developed campground in a national park or forest. After all, you are essentially renting the land for the night (at a much cheaper rate than you could get at a motel, mind you), and it helps offset the cost of running the park.

But asking people to pay money just to set foot on public land rubs many Americans the wrong way. After all, we pay taxes that support these lands and we shouldn't have to pay again to use the parks and forests.

While the \$3 charge at American Fork Canyon isn't too much to pay for many people, there are some working poor people who may find that entry fee a barrier to public lands. Other people just object to the principle of having to pay to use land they're already paying for through their federal taxes.

It's true that tax dollars go to public lands. However, the National Park Service and the Forest Service budgets have not been able to adequately cover operating costs, especially as usage increases.

In American Fork Canyon, for example, 1 million people a year visit the Alpine Loop. Rangers say the gate fee has allowed the Forest Service to upgrade the picnic facilities and improve security in the area.

"It's become a safer place for people to recreate," District Ranger Pam Gordon said.

While the Forest Service points to overwhelmingly positive comments on the fee program, it is presenting a distorted picture. The comments come from people who are using the canyon. Someone who doesn't want to pay the fee will go elsewhere, such as the entry-fee-free Nebo Loop in southern Utah County.

While the law does allow fees to be charged for developed facilities, is it fair to extend the fee to cover the entire 46,000 acres of the Alpine Loop-American Fork Canyon when only a few places fall into the "significant opportunities for outdoor recreation" category? If someone is just going up the road and plans to pull over to get pictures of the quaking Aspen, should they have to pay the entrance fee just because there's a picnic table somewhere else along the road? Does a backcountry hiker, who's going into the undeveloped regions, need to pay the cost for the toilets near the visitors' center?

The ideal solution would be to lobby Congress to give those charged with preserving public lands the resources they need to do the job properly. But if not, maybe we could handle public lands the same as public broadcasting, with people and foundations pledging money to supplement the government funds.

But we shouldn't have a system that bars some Americans from using lands that are being preserved for their benefit.