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Where do all the forest fees go?

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N.S. NOKKENTVED – Provo Daily Herald

Federal and state officials plan to spend nearly \$500,000 this year on recreation management in American Fork Canyon and the Alpine Scenic Loop.

Most of it was collected last year in entrance fees to the popular canyon.

The Uinta National Forest has been collecting entrance fees to the canyon since Aug. 1, 1997. Recreation fees were first authorized by Congress in 1996 and have been adopted on federal lands at many sites across the country to make up for inadequate funding from Congress, Uinta Forest Supervisor Peter Karp said.

In 2004, the forest took in \$418,000 in fees. With \$78,000 left from the previous year, officials have \$496,000 to spend this year.

The Uinta Forest operates the canyon in cooperation with the National Park Service, the Utah Department of Transportation and Utah County. Officials from those agencies get together each year and decide where the money should be spent, said Larry Velarde, recreation staff officer on the Pleasant Grove ranger district.

"It has worked out well," said Timpanogos Cave Superintendent Kit Mullen. But the agencies always seem to have more needs than money.

The fees, along with money appropriated for recreation by Congress, give visitors what they want most: clean toilets and good roads, Velarde said. The money also helps fix picnic tables and fire rings in picnic areas.

The biggest item in this year's budget is \$80,000 to pay employees to collect the fees; that amount is nearly 20 percent of the total collected.

In addition, the Forest Service and National Park Service spent \$46,000 on visitor services and \$64,000 on program management.

That leaves \$308,000 for maintenance and other projects in this year's budget.

Officials plan to spend nearly \$200,000 on maintenance projects. Of that, about \$25,000 would go to OHV trails, \$70,000 for developed recreation, \$30,000 for trail maintenance and \$40,000 for winter recreation.

The budget also includes \$32,000 for this year's installment in reconstruction of the Little Mill campground. The Forest Service local contribution of about \$100,000 is spread over several years, and the rest of the \$1.5 million project will come out of Forest Service capital improvement funds, Velarde said.

The National Park Service will get \$57,000 for interpretive services at the Timpanogos Cave National Monument.

Utah County will get about \$100,000 for supplies and equipment to aid law enforcement, search and rescue and volunteer groups in helping climbers on Mount Timpanogos.

Utah Department of Transportation gets \$5,000 to help with rock stabilization and tree removal for improved road safety.

The fee program began with increased use that resulted in resource damage and public safety complaints, Karp said.

The shortfall in federal appropriations started under the Reagan administration and eventually led to the idea of recreation fees. The recreation fee demonstration program passed by Congress in 1996 was proposed and pushed by the outdoor recreation industry, including such companies as Coleman, Walt Disney and Yamaha Motor Corp.

The controversial fee-demo program allowed the Forest Service and other federal agencies to collect fees to be used at the site where they were collected. The fee program was seen as the solution in American Fork Canyon, Karp said.

"The public accepted that option" he said, as long as the fees were kept reasonable and the money spent in the area. On Aug. 1, 1997, the entrance station was set up at the mouth of American Fork Canyon.

The fee-demo program, which had been extended two years at a time, finally expired in December. It was replaced by the "Recreation Enhancement Act" -- also known as the Recreation Access Tax or RAT by critics -- tacked onto a federal spending bill last year.

Some people resent being charged to hike on public land already supported by their taxes. Most people don't mind paying for campgrounds -- if the toilets are clean.

The new act did away with fees in many areas and established new fee regulations. Among those, Congress prohibited the Forest Service from charging entrance fees.

The Uinta National Forest justifies the entrance fee in American Fork Canyon and the Alpine Loop Highway by defining it as a "high-impact recreation area," a definition not found in the legislation.

But the designation fits the requirements for an area where fees may be charged under the law, says Pam Gardner Pleasant Grove district ranger.

The \$3 entrance fee has not gone up since it was adopted in 1997, she said.

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