

More green for Green Mountain

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EDITORIAL

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Anyone questioning the pay-to-play philosophy should get a tour of Green Mountain Reservoir from the Forest Service. There, the impact of Forest Service funding struggles and careless users, and the need for immediate fixes, can be viewed almost as plainly as a museum display.

Beer cans and Styrofoam cups dot the willow bushes. Roads caused by careless ATV users meander through sensitive wetlands. Deep cracks in dirt parking lots show the effects of erosion when it's not managed properly.

The impacts are already there. Public toilets are dilapidated. Officials discovered the water levels in one septic tank were changing with the levels of Green Mountain Reservoir, meaning human sewage was leaking into the water before the area was shut down. During dry seasons, a major boat ramp doesn't extend into the water far enough, rendering it unusable.

There's still more. Rotting picnic tables with nails sticking through them line one of the most popular areas. It goes on and on. In fact, it caused one Forest Service employee to comment during the tour, "It's really hard to have pride in your job when you don't have the funds to do so."

However, the USFS should get credit for recently stepping back from the issues and forming a management plan to the area. The ensuing report, detailed in today's paper on A1, explains that careless users of the area, and not the district managers, are setting the rules for the land.

Some how, this has to change. The Forest Service, which has seen millions cut back from its annual budget in the past eight years, will raise fees for the area and receive \$1.21 million during the next decade to make the needed improvements.

The Forest Service should be applauded for addressing the problem. And users who want to vent frustration about higher fees should not blame the campground, or the district managers who chose to raise the fees. The blame rests with those with the checkbook in Washington D.C., who are too far away to witness the impact of consistent cutbacks of funding for public lands. Too bad for us, it's in our back yard.

WSNFC Response: Green Mountain Is Poster Child for Forest Service Mismanagement

I am one of those referred to in your March 7 editorial that questions the pay-to-play philosophy of managing our public lands. Here are a few things about the new Green Mountain/Cataract Lake Recreation Management Plan that the Forest Service didn't tell you on your tour. This, as they say, is the rest of the story.

This plan is the result of an insidious Forest Service policy called Recreation Site-Facility Master Planning or RS-FMP. Under RS-FMP, all recreation sites are to become self-sustaining through a combination of reduced services, reduced access, reduced health and safety facilities, increased fees, and increased private operation, or they are to be closed. The Forest Service is implementing this change via policy decisions that have never been subjected to public scrutiny or reviewed by Congress.

Under this plan, fees go up while facilities and services go down. There is \$34,000 budgeted in 2006 alone for removal of toilets and drinking water systems, erection of gates and barricades, and signs to inform users of the new restrictions. Any increase in revenue will be used to hire more personnel to enforce the new rules and collect the fees. The plan says explicitly, "The increase was necessary to increase the presence of Forest Service personnel." Improved facilities such as new toilets are not budgeted for at least 10 years from now.

The law authorizing fees, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act or FLREA, prohibits the Forest Service from charging a fee at sites that lack toilets, picnic tables, trash containers, developed parking, and interpretive signs. It also prohibits fees solely for parking or for access to undeveloped backcountry, such as the parking fee at the Eagle's Nest Wilderness trailheads. The FLREA also calls for an extensive public participation process through Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRACs) before fees can be raised or new fees imposed. These RRACs have not even been established. The fee program at Green Mountain/Cataract is not compliant with the requirements of the FLREA.

The Forest Service admits that it has not spent any appropriated funds at Green Mountain/Cataract since 1993. The plan says that currently "an average of \$50,000 is collected annually." But Fee Demo revenues reported to Congress for Green Mountain/Cataract have varied from a low of \$12,800 (2000) to a high of \$37,656 (2003), with an annual average between 1998-2003 of only \$23,000. If they succeed in collecting \$88,000 per year, that will be a whopping 282% increase over the previous average.

Although the Forest Service claims that 95% of fee revenue has been spent on operations, they fail to point out that their reported Cost of Collection of fees alone has averaged

37.5%, or that none of the fee revenue has been spent on backlogged maintenance, which was the primary reason cited for needing Fee Demo when it was first proposed.

Under this plan anyone camped more than 500 feet from one of the few remaining toilets will be required to have a portable toilet and to carry their urine and feces away with them for disposal in the toilet at home.

The Forest Service acknowledges that this plan will displace many Green Mountain campers, who “tend to be working-class people who prefer to rough-it” and “don’t have a lot of disposable income to allocate toward recreation.” The plan says “the new camping fee for the average visitor will nearly double.” They dismiss this as of no importance, because those displaced “will be replaced by others who will comply.”

The Forest Service points the finger at Congress for reduced funding but in fact their recreation budgets, at the national level, have gone up 1-3% per year. But funds for recreation management are routinely pilfered for other purposes by the agency’s own bureaucracy. When the local districts run short, they are told to make up the difference by implementing fees. A lot of money is simply unaccounted for and impossible to trace because the agency’s internal fiscal controls are inadequate. GAO audits and oversight hearings in Congress have time and again taken the Forest Service to task for gross fiscal mismanagement.

Deflecting blame for increased fees onto Washington won’t wash. It is high time that the Forest Service’s Washington Office opened its books so the public can see what is really happening to their tax dollars. Tax dollars that Congress has appropriated to the recreation program are being spent elsewhere.

It is also time that Congress takes a good long look at the new Forest Service recreation policies such as RS-FMP. Such policies reduce the public’s ability to use their public land by calling for closure of non self-sustaining areas and restricting access to fee sites only. They will have severe negative impacts on local economies.

As for the Green Mountain/ Cataract Lake Recreation Management Plan, I suggest that the Forest Service take a year, follow the provisions of the law, start spending its appropriated recreation dollars on recreation, and really listen to local input.

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