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Trail users will pay fee

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People using a new pathway in the Medicine Bow National Forest will pay a \$5-per-vehicle fee at five newly constructed trailhead areas from just south of Centennial to the Colorado border.

The Medicine Bow Rail-Trail was constructed along the old Laramie, Hahns Peak and Pacific Railroad right of way in the Laramie Ranger District.

"It is a real nice project, except for one thing," said Erik Molvar of Biodiversity Conservation Alliance. "We believe access fees to use public lands are restrictive for people with lower incomes."

Ray George, a recreation planner for the forest, said the 23-mile trail has been designed for hikers and bikers. The trail, still under construction, also features parking, picnic facilities and public toilet facilities.

The fees apply to new trailheads (Pelton Creek, Vienna, Woods Creek, Lincoln Gulch and Lake Owen), as well as three existing developed trailheads (Albany, Ticks and Mountain Home). Fees will be collected in the summer of 2007, when construction on the trail and trailhead facilities is completed.

A Federal Register notice published Monday states that the fees will be used for the continued operation and maintenance of these sites, including restroom cleaning, trash pickup, waste removal, sign maintenance, law enforcement presence, and snow removal.

The issue of charging daily user fees has been controversial. Federal Magistrate Charles Pyle dismissed U.S. Forest Service charges in September against an Arizona woman who was ticketed twice for failure to pay fees when parking or hiking on Mount Lemmon in that state.

Pyle ruled that the Forest Service went beyond congressional authorization when it charged fees for roadside parking, camping outside developed campgrounds, parking at a trailhead, or for roadside picnicking.

About 4,505 national forest sites across the country have been charging fees.

Wyoming is one of three states -- along with Alaska and Nebraska -- that don't have recreation resource advisory committees to provide recommendations concerning

recreation fee proposals for public lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The U.S. Departments of Agriculture and the Interior announced in September the establishment of these new public advisory committees.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act requires the Interior and Agriculture secretaries to establish a recreation advisory committee in each state or region unless, in consultation with the governor of the state, it is determined insufficient interest exists to establish one.

Temple Stevenson, a policy analyst in the Wyoming governor's office, said federal agencies were already engaged in gathering public comment on the Medicine Bow fee proposal. "We just felt it would be duplicative to set up a state (advisory committee)," she said.

There is a Wyoming Recreation Action Team that follows the recreation fee issue on public lands. The team is co-chaired by Jane Darnell of the Forest Service and Diane Schober, director of the state tourism office.