

# Willamette Week

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### Fee Fi Fo Dumb

#### **An Oregon congressman smells the blood of a federal recreation fee.**

BY PAUL GERALD

As the feds roll out one more park pass to make people pay for recreation on public lands, U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) wants to go the opposite direction—eliminating fees.

DeFazio has failed twice before when Republicans controlled the House to wipe out the recreation fee system entirely. But now that DeFazio and the Democrats control Congress, the Oregon congressman aims to replace the fee revenue with a "small royalty" on mining operations on federal lands.

"Outside of parks or developed campsites...I don't believe we should charge fees to access public lands," says DeFazio, a member of the House Natural Resources Committee. "We should be paying for, and investing in, facilities out of general funds."

In the most recent year available, 2005, the fees brought in about \$50 million.

That fee system dates back to 1996 and became permanent in 2004 with the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. In a move that enraged DeFazio and others, the act was never introduced as a separate bill so the House or Senate could vote in the open on the setup. Instead, it was attached to a must-pass spending bill in a conference committee deal among Republicans.

DeFazio thinks his new proposal would work because, unlike his previous efforts to abolish the fees, this proposal replaces them with another revenue source—the mining royalties.

The prospect of abolishing fees that generate \$50 million a year nationwide may be difficult, even with DeFazio's idea to use mine royalties to replace the fee revenue.

Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), who sits on the Senate Natural Resources Committee, didn't return messages seeking comment on DeFazio's idea.

In January, the feds unveiled the America the Beautiful Pass, which permits access to all national parks as well as Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service and Department of Fish and Wildlife lands.

An annual pass sells for \$80. It doesn't replace the Northwest Forest Pass, which costs \$30 a year (or \$5 for one day) and allows access only to certain National Forest Service sites in Oregon and Washington.

But Forest Pass sites now honor the new America the Beautiful Pass.

To Jocelyn Biro, Forest Service fee administrator for the Pacific Northwest, the new pass is a model of convenience.

"If you're visiting a number of areas in the country during the year, especially more than one national park, this pass makes a lot of sense," says Biro. "It also brings some discounts for camping and interpretive tours."

To others, the new pass is the latest outrage in a creeping march toward "paying to play" on all federal lands. Detractors include Congress' investigative arm, the Government Accountability Office, and DeFazio.

"Originally they made the case that there would be a good, solid budget, and the fee would add to that for projects they couldn't get to," DeFazio says. "But Congress pulled back on funding for recreation."

Information from the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Region would seem to back up DeFazio's claims. The Mount Hood Forest, for example, reported that in 2005 it collected \$323,465 in recreation fees and spent \$295,793 on the forest. But that money wasn't spent on deferred maintenance such as reopening old trails or rebuilding damaged campsites. Instead, it was spent on routine maintenance, picnic tables and trash cans, volunteer training and user surveys and to open new rental cabins and lookout towers.

Fee proponents, including the American Recreation Coalition, hail the law's provision that 80 percent of revenues stay where the passes are bought.

But both the GAO and DeFazio have raised questions about how the fees are spent and how the Forest Service tracks them.

"We haven't done a hearing on this for number of years," DeFazio said, "and the question of where and how the money flows is one of many the Republicans have neglected."

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