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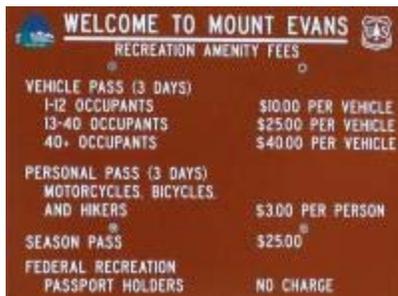
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State chops feds' fee for Mt. Evans

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Motorists who didn't use the facilities didn't have to pay, the Forest Service insists, but critics say nobody would guess that from this sign. (The Denver Post)

The views along the Mount Evans Highway have been described as priceless, but for the past nine years the U.S. Forest Service has managed to nick as much as \$10 from virtually every vehicle heading up the highest paved road in the country.

That practice will come to an abrupt end this summer. The Colorado Department of Transportation insists the federal government cannot charge for use of a state highway built and maintained with state tax dollars.

"We didn't know that they were charging everyone," said CDOT spokeswoman Stacey Stegman. " ...It's illegal under state law."

The Forest Service began charging travelers at its Echo Lake entrance station in 1997 under the controversial federal fee-demonstration program, which has generated as much as \$300,000 annually for upkeep of rest rooms, picnic areas and safety patrols on the mountain.

Few visitors have understood that the fees don't apply to those traveling to and from the 14,126-foot summit parking lot who don't use Forest Service picnic areas and rest rooms. In fact, a sign posted at the bottom of the winding, 28-mile road reads: "A pass is required for travel beyond this point."

"They have been misrepresenting things. The average person would think that he had to pay," said Robert Funkhouser, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, an organization battling the federal government over fees for use of public lands.

Forest officials dispute that characterization, insisting the "pass" could be obtained free of charge. They acknowledge many people didn't discern the difference between acquiring a pass and paying a fee.

Drivers had to ask specifically about the pass or they would be charged the use fees.

Completed in 1927, the summer-only, dead-end highway each year attracts an estimated 130,000

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visitors.

This past winter, when state and federal authorities began revisiting their agreement on the operation



Heather Campagna collected a fee from this motorcyclist at the U.S. Forest Service's Echo Lake entrance station in 2001, but the practice will not resume when the road reopens later this spring. (Post file / Glenn Asakawa)

of Colorado 5, state officials learned every vehicle was being charged.

State officials demanded that the renewed agreement include signs indicating "No charge for travel on State Highway 5" and "USFS fees are not used to maintain State Highway 5."

The Forest Service balked, not wanting to pay for the signs.

"They're thinking: 'How are we going to get people to pay if they don't have to pay?'" Funkhouser said.

The state intends to install signs with or without federal approval, according to e-mails obtained from Jay Kramer, a manager with CDOT.

With the traditional opening about a month away, forest supervisors haven't decided how the road will be managed, but possibilities include abandoning the entrance station and establishing permanent fee-collection stations at facilities maintained by the agency, said John Bustos, spokesman for the Arapaho and Roosevelt national forests.

The Forest Service also hasn't hazarded a guess on how much its budget will be cut if far fewer people pay.

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