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Stanton: He has a dream: our lands, free of fees

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If Sen. Max Baucus has his way, Christine Wallace will be hiking Mount Lemmon without fear of further fines.

We'll all be able to cruise into Madera and Sabino canyons for free, and private profits off our public lands will be reduced.

Baucus, fellow Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester and Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, now have introduced the "Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act of 2007" - aka S 2438.

FREAA at last, FREAA at last. That's the hope.

As most American adults remember, before 1996, access fees weren't allowed on federal land except national parks or at boat docks or campgrounds.

Then a "fee demo" project was approved via a rider slipped into an appropriations bill.

Concessionaires insisted the fees would enable public-private partnerships, saving tax money.

In essence, of course, the fees are piled atop the price of hunting permits, fishing licenses, campground fees and federal taxes already paid by Joe Sixpack.

That explains why nearly one-fourth of families living on less than \$30,000 a year say the fee has deterred them from public lands use, a Forest Service survey found.

Many nature lovers of means don't mind anteing up \$5 here or \$20 there to visit wild lands, believing the money is spent on legitimate improvements.

Guess again.

The Government Accountability Office repeatedly has raised concerns about accounting for the fees revenue by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service and, to a lesser extent, the National Park Service.

Officials in Coronado National Forest, for example, lament \$3.2 million in deferred maintenance despite the infusion of fees.

And now the Coronado, home of Mount Lemmon, plans to remove 11 sites from its developed recreation program, shorten the seasons of use for 40 sites and, also at 40 sites, remove toilets, close picnic areas and eliminate other amenities while establishing six new fee sites for reasons such as adding electrical outlets at a ramada.

Among specific examples, the Molino Basin campground's water system would be shut down, and the Loma Linda picnic site dumpster would be removed.

Many toilets would be removed, too: They require cleaning, maintenance and toilet paper.

The new forest philosophy seems to be: Pay the fee, but bring your own water, take your trash home and, well, you might want to "go" behind that tree.

Coronado officials also have asked Pima County if it will take over the Palisades Ranger Station so the Forest Service won't have to run it anymore.

And all these plans have been crafted without a single public hearing.

Meanwhile, in Upper Sabino Canyon, 20 picnic sites and the drinking water system would be closed and a toilet removed. Lower Sabino will bid goodbye to 10 picnic sites, a toilet and a hydrant. At Sabino Canyon dam, five picnic areas would be closed and another toilet removed.

So how are our fees spent? Nationwide, the GAO found, about \$296 million in fees was stashed in unobligated accounts by the four agencies.

Half of fees paid to the Forest Service and BLM are spent on collection of the fees, including by contractor collectors whose "commissions" haven't been counted, in violation of federal accounting standards, the GAO says.

Nationally, 58 percent of Forest Service sites have more than a year's worth of fees squirreled away.

And when the money is spent, it goes to day-to-day operations rather than the improvements touted before the Recreation Access Tax (RAT) was begun.

"If it helped these areas, that would be one thing, but it doesn't," says Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, based in Durango, Colo. "People think we're crying wolf, but this is real stuff."

Christine Wallace isn't accusing anyone of crying wolf. She was fined \$100 by a federal judge this year for having had the audacity to hike on Mount Lemmon without paying any fee.

Now she is "thrilled" by the introduction of the Baucus bill and the prospect of again being able to hike in our forests and other lands sans fees.

Me, too. Something's terribly wrong when one-fourth of low-income families can't use U.S. lands set aside decades ago for free, perpetual access by all.

Those families, especially the children, deserve to learn about nature and our environment, too.

The RAT smacks of classism - and treats taxpayers as rubes who can bolster private profits while losing public amenities.

Back the Baucus bill and rout the RATs. Let's get back to living in the land of the free, the way we're supposed to be.

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