

Miracles do happen!

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Miracles do happen! In an age of bitter political recrimination, a truly bipartisan bill has just been introduced in the US Congress by Senators Crapo (R-ID) and Baucus (D-MT). The Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act (S. 2438) would roll back thousands of fees that Americans are being charged for mere access to their public lands.

In 1996, a rider was slipped into an appropriations bill giving federal lands agencies the right to temporarily charge fees for many activities that hitherto had been free to the public and supported by general tax funds. Activities such as backcountry camping, hiking, and merely passing through public lands were now being charged fees. In one California forest they even charged a fee to park near a cliff to see the sunset! Over the years, these fees multiplied like a cancer, all over the US, even reaching into Idaho.

Agencies such as the Forest Service, US Fish & Wildlife, and the Bureau of Land Management, starved for funds, created more and more fee areas.

Then in 2004 another rider, making the fees permanent, was slipped into another must-pass appropriations bill. We nicknamed it the R.A.T (Recreation Access Tax).

Agencies now became emboldened in finding questionably legal ways of charging ever-more fees. No fees for wilderness camping allowed? No problem. They charged for parking at the trailhead.

In Sandpoint, we collected 400 names on a petition to repeal these fees. My wife, Lanie Johnson, presented the petition to Senator Craig. We asked State Representative George Eskridge to sponsor an Idaho Resolution against the R.A.T. Rep. Eric Anderson co-sponsored it. The resolution passed both houses, unanimously.

We are at the threshold of success, but the way ahead is still challenging. There will be hearings and votes at several levels. We face powerful opposition. There is an entrenched bureaucracy to overcome, as well as the ARC (American Recreation Coalition). It is composed of such organizations as Marriott Hotels, International Association for Amusement Parks & Attractions, and the Walt Disney Company. They lobbied for these fees. They want to "manage" our public lands (i.e. develop them, either in "partnership" with the government or to buy them outright if they can get laws passed allowing them to do so).

American public lands are unique. No other country has anything like them. They belong to Americans. We do not need the king's permission to walk on them. We must keep them this way. Contact Senators Crapo and Baucus and tell them that you support S. 2438. Tell your friends in other states to ask their Senators to co-sponsor the bill.

Let's remain the Land of the Free, not the Land of the Fee.

You can contact Sen. Crapo at crapo.senate.gov/contact/email.html and Sen Baucus at baucus.senate.gov

Ken Fischman