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Federal camping fees begin big rise in California

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WASHINGTON – Overnight rates at some Sequoia National Forest campgrounds are jumping 70 percent this year as hard-pressed U.S. Forest Service officials scramble for new funds.

The fee increases still leave even the priciest campgrounds a relative bargain at \$17 a night. But the new charges at five of Sequoia's 54 campgrounds also portend things to come, in California and nationwide. Spurred by Congress and squeezed by other costs, national forest managers will be jacking up fees to support local projects.

"We're trying to walk that fine line between having reasonable access to the great outdoors, which we all own, and providing the money needed for maintenance," said Nathan Rangel, a Sierra Nevada river guide and member of a key Forest Service advisory committee.

Some lawmakers and activists want to curtail the higher fees, which they consider unwarranted. For now, though, the fee increases have momentum.

"We're making certain that when someone, say, is renting a cabin on Forest Service land, then we'll be able to have the money to maintain the cabin," Rangel said. He serves on the California Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, an 11-member federal panel now quietly shaping what people will pay for using Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recreation facilities. Together, the two federal agencies manage 35 million acres in California – roughly one-third of the entire state.

Congress gave the agencies enhanced powers to raise fees in 2004. Guided by the newly formed advisory committees, officials are starting to do so. In California, certain Sequoia, Eldorado and Mendocino national forest campgrounds began costing more in January, along with a few other sites statewide.

In the Sequoia forest, for instance, campsites at Kennedy Meadows and four other sites that once cost \$10 a night will cost \$17. Hikers on the popular Eagle Falls trail near Lake Tahoe will pay \$5 starting in May, up from \$3. Off-road adventurers on the BLM's Clear Creek area that touches western Fresno and Stanislaus counties face new vehicle fees of \$15.

Most of the money raised through higher fees will remain for local projects instead of being absorbed by the U.S. Treasury.

Congress gave federal land managers the power to raise fees and keep the money starting in the mid-1990s. The 2004 law extended this power.

At some point, however, visitors begin howling about fee increases and lawmakers jerk to attention. In June, for instance, public protests caused the National Park Service to retreat from a proposal to further boost Yosemite's entrance fee to \$25. Some lawmakers raise similar red flags about higher fees on other federal lands.

In December, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., introduced legislation repealing the new Forest Service and BLM fee program.

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