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Shasta-T should keep rivers free for their visitors

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Our view: A forest recreation plan raises the prospect of day-use fees around the Trinity and McCloud rivers. That idea just doesn't hold water.

As if gassing up the truck for a drive to the mountains didn't already cost enough, the Shasta-Trinity National Forest is looking to raise existing fees and possibly impose new ones for campers, picnickers and other forest users.

Some of the increases are a reasonable bow to the rising cost of maintenance in the decade since the fees were last set. Most campsites, under the Forest Service's plan, would cost \$10 to \$15 a night -- a reasonable charge, even low compared with state and national parks around the north state. Group camps would go for between \$40 and \$75 a night. Daily rental of cabins and lookouts would about double -- to \$60 to \$75.

So far so good, but the Shasta-Trinity is also inching toward new day-use fees for anglers, kayakers and rock-skippers along the Trinity River (\$5 a day, with annual passes available for \$50) and at Fisherman's Point, near Shasta Dam (\$3 a day). These would charge not for camping, launching a boat or other specific services, but simply for taking in the scenery.

The Shasta-Trinity drew up a proposal for the Trinity River day-use fee, and it's included as a possibility in the forest's five-year plan for recreation management, but Brenda Tracy, acting recreation officer for the forest, said Friday that it won't go forward this year.

"If we're going to introduce the new fee, we wanted to do it with built-in support," she said, adding that campground fees will likely rise at the end of this summer but that the day-use fee will wait for "Round 2 or Round 3."

The Trinity day-use fee is not the only such charge being studied. As part of its broader review of recreation management, the Shasta-Trinity is also considering a day-use fee around the McCloud Falls, the scenic and popular escape from the summer heat.

Forest officials stress that they have no immediate plan for a McCloud fee, but it's on the list of possible actions over the next five years. Again, these fees wouldn't be for camping -- but simply for the privilege of hiking the trail and jumping in the glacial water.

The 2004 law that allows such fees is the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, but to residents who've enjoyed these spots for free over the decades, the new fees are hardly an enhancement. Charging for simple access to lands we all own, to rivers all Californians have a right to use, is wrong.

We all appreciate well-maintained recreational sites -- with clean bathrooms, empty trash cans and picnic tables that won't injure the kids' backsides. Those cost money to keep up, and it's hard to argue with modest fees that help do so.

But charging simply to park the pickup and enjoy the river is a different story.

Shasta-Trinity recreation planners plainly recognize that, to judge by their hesitance to move forward with the day-use fees. In this case, we'll happily root for many more years of bureaucratic inaction.