

IdahoStatesman.com

[close](#)[Click Here to Print This Article](#)

April 13, 2008

Zimo: The commercialization of public lands has to stop

Campers, hikers, anglers, bird watchers and others are being priced out of the woods.

Recent proposals to increase campground fees in the Boise and Sawtooth national forests have only fueled the fire. A grass-roots effort has been mounting against federal recreation fees, and Sens. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, and Max Baucus, D-Mont., have introduced the Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act of 2007.

The bill would revoke the authority of federal agencies to add or raise fees established under the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program.

"Recreating on federal public lands has been a cherished birthright of Americans for generations and, with a few narrow exceptions, a right enjoyed without charge," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, based in Durango, Colo. (www.westernslopenofee.org).

"The 1996 Recreational Fee Demonstration Program radically altered that tradition by requiring payment simply to access public lands for hiking, camping and many other activities," she said.

Benzar is backing the Senate bill to repeal fees and halt what she calls the commercialization of public lands.

The term commercialization of public lands is the key.

Many thought the rec fee program was going to be good because it took recreation fees and kept them locally for recreational improvements.

It did improve boat-launch areas and restrooms along the Payette River near Banks. But the program went bonkers. Because it kept fees local and out of the Treasury, federal agencies scrambled to come up with ways to charge for everything they could get away with, including picnics in the woods.

Federal agencies have got it all wrong now - they're milking the public in any way possible. The Baucus bill will reverse that and hopefully turn the tide on out-of-control rec fees.

Let's get something straight: A rec fee is a tax. Politicians like to say they are cutting your taxes, but then they nail you with higher user fees. It's a tax in disguise. Raising campground fees and charging other rec fees isn't the answer to funding recreation sites.

Congress has to make sure recreation budgets for the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or whatever other agency that handles public lands are fully funded.

Congress has to make sure the money gets down to the district level where it is needed for campground and recreation-site maintenance and operation.

Recreation funding doesn't need to go to the Washington bureaucracy. It doesn't need to go to the regional bureaucracy. It needs to go to the district.

Federal agencies at the ground level have a legitimate gripe about funding. In announcing a proposal to raise campground fees last fall, the Boise National Forest listed some figures.

Revenue from recreation fees and appropriations from Congress amount to roughly \$650,000. Boise National Forest has an operation and maintenance budget of \$760,000 annually. It also is dealing with \$1.6 million in maintenance and improvements that are not getting done.

But that's no excuse to price the average camper out of the woods with higher camping fees, fees to take a walk in the woods, or fees to park at a trailhead or picnic area.

The concept of public ownership of public lands has been lost. Federal agencies now refer to the public as customers. The more federal agencies operate the outdoors like a commodity, the more the public loses.

It's the same with the privatization of the operation of federal campgrounds. Private companies close campgrounds as soon as the first cool breeze hits after Labor Day weekend. They don't want to be maintaining campgrounds if only a few campers show up. It's not profitable. Profitable? It's not Disneyland.

There should be some fees. Areas that require significant upkeep, such as developed campgrounds, should have a modest fee.

But let's not price the public out of the outdoors.

COOL STUFF

Spring has been a long time coming, but it was great to see that first yellow bell blooming in the Boise Foothills a couple of weeks ago.

A great program coming up is a weekend of wildflower programs May 10-11 at City of Rocks National Reserve and Castle Rocks State Park. What better treat for mom one of several leisurely walks on Mother's Day weekend to see wildflowers. The walks begin at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. each day.

We camped at City of Rocks one spring a few years back. What an incredible place - the huge steel-gray rocks, the gray-green sagebrush-juniper expanse and the wildflowers are unforgettable.

A light-hearted look at "chasing" wildflowers in the Albion Mountains will be presented at Smoky Mountain Campground at 8 p.m. May 10.

Participants can bring a camera and participate in the Photo Safari at 9 a.m. May 11 or take a van tour along alpine roads for a view of high-mountain wildflowers.

Programs are free, but there is a \$4 entry fee for the park. Camping fees range from \$12 to \$20, depending on hookups and location.

City of Rocks and Castle Rocks are located 50 miles south of Burley, near the historic community of Almo. They're about 4 hours from Boise.

For more information on these parks and wildflower weekend events, see nps.gov/ciro or parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/parks/castlerocks, or contact Juanita Jones at (208) 824-5519, ext. 106.

BIKING VIDEO

This week's Idaho Outdoors video gives you a look at the bicycle commuting scene on the Boise Greenbelt.

Check the video out at videos.idahostatesman.com. It's the only fresh weekly outdoors show in the Valley.

Pete Zimowsky: 377-6445