



## Green Mountain fee hike still in question

Advisory group looking for evidence of public support

**By BOB BERWYN**  
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SUMMIT COUNTY — The U.S. Forest Service will go back to a citizen advisory group in June to try and win approval for a fee increase at campgrounds and day-use areas around Green Mountain Reservoir.

The same panel voted against the fee hike in February, but Forest Service rangers said the vote didn't count.

"I would say it was not formally presented," said Paul Cruz, developed recreation program manager for the agency's Rocky Mountain region. "It was a test case, a trial run."

Rather than evaluating the Green Mountain plan on its own merits, Cruz said the advisory group got stuck on technical language in the federal law that authorizes recreation fees.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act requires that the Forest Service must show general public support for fees. But the advisory group couldn't agree on what exactly that means, Cruz said.

"Even though we presented it and they voted on it, we felt like it didn't count," said Ken Waugh, recreation staff officer for the Dillon Ranger District.

Kitty Benzar, of the Western Slope No Fee Coalition, has a different take on the February meeting. Benzar raised the issue of public support during the public comment segment of the meeting.

"I can't define it (general public support) any better than they can," Benzar said. "It's a poorly written law. We've said that from the beginning," Benzar said.

"The very least they could do is have another meeting in Heeney this summer when users are there," Benzar added.

According to Benzar, who kept detailed notes of the discussions at the meeting, the advisory group rejected the Green Mountain fee hike because the Forest Service couldn't show that the public likes the recreation fees.

"They absolutely did not see that Green Mountain has general public support," Benzar said.

Fee proposals must comply with the language in the federal law, Benzar said. But the Green Mountain plan, along with most of the other proposals, didn't even meet the standards for public involvement, and the agency is far from showing it has public support.

### **Non-decision?**

"We decided not to decide," said Steve Sherwood, director of the regional Forest Service recreation, heritage and wilderness resources program. "We didn't have enough information to make a decision," Sherwood said.

Two members of the citizen panel, including local resident and outfitter Leslie Miller, agreed with Sherwood.

There were so many questions about the definition of general public support that the committee wasn't able to decide on the Green Mountain plan on its own merits, Miller said.

"I wish we didn't have to charge fees," Sherwood said. "We're not looking for ways to nickel and dime the public," he continued. "We had a long discussion about what (general public support) means," he continued.

In the end, the Forest Service decided to ask its attorneys to interpret the language of the law and develop a format with which to review whether fee proposals meet the standard, Sherwood said.

The Forest Service wants the issue of public support to be viewed in the context of public benefits a fee might provide.

Benzar said she thinks the agency must show local, on-the-ground support from users of a site.

For now, the Forest Service will operate the campgrounds and day use areas at Green Mountain Reservoir with revenues from the existing fees. But if the fee increase is rejected again by the advisory committee in June, the agency will have to re-evaluate its management plan for the area. In the worst-case scenario, that could even mean closing down some of the popular recreation sites.

### **History**

Recreation fees have been controversial since they were approved as a test program in 1997. Along with the Green Mountains sites, the Cataract Lake trailhead and the Vail Pass winter recreation area are also subject to the fees.

The test program was expanded under the 2004 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, but has been met with a barrage of criticism ever since. Ultimately, the fate of the fee program may be decided on the political level, as citizen groups like the Western Slope No Fee Coalition lobby against the fees in Congress.

Several U.S. senators from western states have launched a push to abolish the fee program, but the upcoming November elections have slowed the momentum of that effort.

Along with the many national forest fee areas, the Bureau of Land Management is also proposing fees for numerous sites, including a few that could affect Summit County residents. The BLM is seeking public input on fee proposals for several campgrounds around Fruita that are popular with Summit County mountain bikers.

They include the North Fruita Desert campground, along Mesa County Road 18, and the Mud Springs campground, about 20 miles southwest of Grand Junction.

For more information on those sites, visit <http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/gjfo.html>.

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