

## Losing Its Appeal: Fee Demo Challenge



A hiker and her dog follow a trail in Durango, Colorado. Photo © Dusty Boots Photography

**By Patricia Marshall**  
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In November 2007, Senator Max Baucus of Montana introduced a bill to repeal the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. If the bill passes, national forest visitors will no longer have to pay to park at trailheads or at scenic overlooks, but fees would still be levied for developed sites, such as campgrounds and visitor centers.

The idea of paying to play on public lands has been riddled with controversy since Congress passed the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program in 1996. The program allowed local forests to impose user fees on recreation sites, and to keep a significant percentage of the proceeds to address maintenance issues in those specific areas. Originally begun as a pilot program (see Point of View, p. 44), the Fee Demo experiment garnered huge opposition from recreationists outraged at being charged a fee to visit their favorite recreation spots. But despite the outcry, Congress made the program permanent when it tacked the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which replaced the temporary Fee Demo program with permanent fee collection legislation, onto a spending bill in 2004.

Recreation has always drawn large numbers of visitors to public lands, but recreation dollars have never come close to matching logging revenues. In 2006, the U.S. Forest Service collected nearly \$60 million nationwide in fees, a drop in the bucket when compared with the agency's \$4 billion annual budget. But with wildland firefighting consuming an ever-larger portion of the federal budget—\$1.4 billion last year alone—and shrinking federal allocations, the fee dollars have provided significant boosts to local Forest Service budgets.

But even as proponents of the fee collection system have suggested that shifting some of the burden of maintaining federal lands onto the users is a reasonable market response, visitation to public lands is on the decline. A recent study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reports that visitation to national parks and forests, as well as state parks, has decreased by 25 percent since 1987. The authors cite a rise in electronic entertainment over the same period, and suggest that there is a "fundamental shift away from people's appreciation of nature." National parks visitation has decreased significantly since 1997, a period that coincides with the increased fees allowed under the Fee Demo program.

Tom Stevens, a professor of resource economics at the University of Massachusetts who studies the economics of recreation, says fees may be a contributing factor to the decline.

"The law of economics says that when price goes up, people consume less," he says.

If the Baucus bill passes, recreation fees won't all disappear. Before the Fee Demo program, federal lands were allowed to collect limited fees under the provisions of the 1965 Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, which allowed federal agencies to charge fees in developed recreation sites, and also allowed entrance fees to be collected at national parks. A repeal of the Federal Lands Act would reinstate the status of the Land and Water Act.

Scott Silver, executive director of the group Wild Wilderness, which opposes the fee program, says that in some areas the end of the program would have very little impact. He cites the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon, where 80 percent of the fees collected are taken in at the Newberry National Volcanic Monument. If the original Land and Water Act were restored, those fees would still be allowed, but parking and trailhead fees would no longer be collected. Given that the agency would save money on collection and enforcement of fees on other parts of the forest, Silver says, "If this [Baucus] bill passed, nothing would change. We'd be cash-neutral here."

But Jocelyn Biro, recreation fee program coordinator in Region Six, points out a crucial difference. Funds collected under the Land and Water Act

guidelines go to the general treasury, whereas in the current program, fees stay on the unit where they were collected. In Oregon and Washington, where Biro works, recreation fees add \$9.5 million to the budget annually. Biro says her region leverages the money, applying for matching grant funds to increase the dollars available for a myriad of projects, from upkeep of rental cabins and fire towers to improved campsites.

"Since the fee demo program started, the retention of fees is what allows us to keep a lot of facilities operational to meet basic health and safety needs, to provide clean water and sanitation at a lot of our recreation facilities," she says.

Meanwhile, some states are taking matters into their own hands. Congress gave federal agencies the powers to raise fees, based on recommendations from local advisory committees. The California Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, an eleven-panel group that is examining fees charged on state and federal land in California, is planning an increase in fees for the state's Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recreation areas.

Paul McFarland, a committee member and the executive director of Friends of the Inyo, an environmental group in California, says that if federal agencies lose their ability to charge fees and retain them locally, sites will begin to shut down. Not only will visits decline, but local economies will suffer.

"Our bread and butter is the surrounding public lands and the beauty that's there," he says of rural California. "If you come out and the asphalt is broken, the trails are in disrepair and the signs are destroyed, you're not going to come back, and you go away with the feeling that America doesn't care very much for its public land."

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