

Kern Valley (CA) Sun

Large crowd at Forest Service Proposed Fee Meeting

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Barrie Mann - Special to the Sun

It was a full house at the Town Hall meeting organized and hosted by the Lake Isabella and Bodfish Property Owners Association on the evening of Tuesday, July 15. The meeting was to discuss the proposed fees for recreation use around the lake and upper Kern River. Carol Rutledge, president of the association and the moderator for the evening, thanked everyone for attending then explained the format of the meeting.

The June 5 meeting in Kernville had been a rather raucous affair, and Rutledge saw the wisdom in laying down some guidelines early on. She stated there would be two presentations by valley residents and one by Tina Terrell, Forest Supervisor of the Sequoia National Forest. Rutledge explained that there would be a question and answer period after all the presentations had been made. At that time any person with a question or comment would be given the opportunity to speak; with each speaker limited to two minutes in which to ask his or her question or comment, she said. Index cards were distributed to those who had questions but did not wish to speak. Those questions would be compiled and given to the Forest Service for a written response.

First up was Kernville resident Peter Weichers, an avid kayaker and teacher at Camp Irwin Owen. He reported on his recent trip to Washington, D.C. and spoke of his testimony before Congress on the issue of the Forest Service's proposed fee hikes. Weichers said he was disappointed because during his testimony several members of the audience, identified as staff of the U.S. Department of the Interior, got up and left the hearing, thus giving him the impression that issue being discussed was of little concern to the government's representatives.

Weichers explained that rafting companies and others have conditional or special use permits, granted by the Forest Service, to do business on the Kern River and other Forest Service land. In return, the companies pay the Forest Service a fee equal to three percent of their gross revenues. Weichers told the crowd he has requested information from the Forest Service about the agency's use and allocation of these monies. The information received was minimal with little detail, he said. Weichers added that his analysis of the data given to him made little sense, thus causing more questions. His presentation concluded with Weichers' challenge that the Forest Service provide more accurate information to the public. He receiving a boisterous round of applause for his comments.

Next up was Ron Benoit, past president of the Lake Isabella and Bodfish Property Owners Association. He spoke of past practices and of the effort he and others made several years ago when Dave Freeland, District Ranger at the time, first introduced the subject of fees. Benoit continued by describing the meetings with Freeland and the eventual outcome of compromise. It was agreed that fees would be instituted from the 2.1-mile stretch of land from the Auxiliary Dam to the South Fork recreation area. Benoit opined quite clearly that the Forest Service's current proposed fee structure is very different from the fee structure agreed to several years back. Benoit was adamant; he strongly disagrees with the proposal that is being made by the Forest Service.

Forest Supervisor Terrell then spoke. "I want it to be very clear in every person's mind that I am very public-minded," she said, adding that she has insisted on getting the public's input. Terrell conceded that in the past the Forest Service has not been forthcoming with information and seeking public input when similar proposals have been put forward. "As the Sequoia Forest Supervisor, I am responsible for the management of 1.2 million acres of our (your) public land," she said. She said that seeking public dialog on the proposed fee structure was her decision. She went on to say that she feels strongly about getting public comment, building partnerships with interest groups and the public in general. "The Sequoia National Monument is the crown jewel of the forest, but Lake Isabella and the Kern River Valley is a diamond in the rough and I want to polish it," she said. She continued to explain the Forest Service's position, citing diminishing funding from the federal government, the huge expense of fighting an increasing number of wild fires, and the rising costs of general maintenance as cause for the necessity of the proposed fee increases.

With calm professionalism, Terrell countered many of the points made by the previous two speakers. She acknowledged that she heard the concerns voiced at the previous meeting, and that solutions to questions and issues raised at that meeting were being addressed. For example, the annual Fishing Derby in Lake Isabella and the July 4th firework celebration could be designated "Free Days" thus eliminating the concerns voiced by many about those two issues. She was adamant in saying that the fee proposal is just that, a proposal; nothing has been decided at this point. She added that she will call for another public meeting in September; questions and comments of the two most recent meetings still need to be responded to.

Several members of the audience then spoke, asking specific questions or making comments. Forest Service personnel were given the opportunity to respond. Several questions from the crowd focused on the Forest Service budget and management practices. There were calls for a public review of the budget or for cuts in personnel at the Forest Service. Others spoke about the impact on the financial health of the valley should the fees go into effect, citing they felt that an imposed fee structure would be detrimental.

No one spoke in favor of the fees. Most who commented did so with intelligence and forethought. However, it was clear that the fee structure being proposed by the Forest Service is still an emotional issue for many and will continue to be so. One can only hope

that the Forest Service is indeed listening to the public and is willing to seek alternative solutions to the problem.

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Comments

1 comment(s)

Peg Greenberg wrote on Jul 18, 2008 8:42 AM:

" Thanks for the update, Barrie. I personally have a problem with a Gov't agency, who is mandated to provide financial reports quarterly (at a minimum)yet say they are unable to tell us where the funds collected over the past 3 years have gone. How do we know we should agree to more fees when we don't know if and how they managed previous fees. "