

## Red Rock Canyon fee hike in works

### Bureau of Land Management to discuss rates unchanged since 1997

By KEITH ROGERS  
REVIEW-JOURNAL



Phil Fiol collects money Tuesday from a visitor at the entrance to Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area's 13-mile scenic drive. The Bureau of Land Management plans to increase fees at the park. An eight-step review and approval process will take more than a year to complete.

Photo by [John Locher](#).



A cyclist on the Red Rock Scenic Loop dismounts and walks as the hill gets steeper in August 2004. For now, bicyclists and pedestrians can travel the 13-mile route for free while motorists pay.

Photo by [Gary Thompson](#).

Bureau of Land Management officials said Tuesday that they are taking the first steps to increase entrance fees at Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area.

The amount of the fee increase hasn't been determined, but it's needed to offset anticipated costs for operating and maintaining a new visitors center "and management of the national conservation area as a whole," said Bob Taylor, field manager for Red Rock Canyon and Sloan Canyon national conservation areas.

Since the bureau began collecting entrance fees in November 1997, the cost has remained \$5 per vehicle, \$2 per motorcycle, or \$20 for an annual passport. Bicyclists and pedestrians can travel the 13-mile scenic drive on the western outskirts of Las Vegas for free.

The proposed fee increase will be discussed Nov. 12 by a subcommittee of the BLM's three resource advisory councils. The advisory group makes recommendations on recreation fees for federal lands in Nevada managed by the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service.

The panel also will discuss proposals to increase fees at Forest Service campgrounds in the Ely area and the BLM's campgrounds at Red Rock Canyon.

The bulk of fee collections occur at the entrance to Red Rock Canyon's scenic loop, which put nearly \$1.6 million in the local BLM's till during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30.

Money from entrance fees has been used to construct fee stations and campgrounds, build new restrooms, remodel the visitors center, improve trails, and repair and maintain roads. Fee collection expenses in the first two years of the program amounted to \$356,000.

Taylor said it will take a while to determine how much the increase will be. An eight-step review and approval process will take more than a year to complete.

"We want to be able to adjust our fees appropriately," Taylor said. "We don't want to go out there and skin anybody. We just want to cover the cost of maintaining and operating the facility."

John Hiatt, conservation chairman of the Red Rock Audubon Society, was disappointed after hearing about plans to increase fees.

"I'm not very keen on fees to visit our public lands, our taxpayer-supported lands," Hiatt said. "In a way, we are getting taxed twice. The public owns the lands, and now we're getting charged to use them."

A draft budget planning document shows that more than 50 BLM staff members are involved with operating and maintaining Red Rock Canyon's facilities. Their jobs range from law enforcement to personnel management.

Money spent on fee booth operations and interpretative assistance was about \$34,000 per month, or roughly \$408,000 this year, according to the draft report dated Oct. 29, 2007. That money goes to the nonprofit Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association, which Taylor said employs about 20 people.

"They have some of the skill sets we don't have, such as development of special education programs and outreach programs, the Mojave Max program for people to understand the environment," Taylor said.

Under the fee collection pilot program launched in 1997, the money was supposed to be used primarily for:

- Repairs and improvements to roads, buildings, campgrounds and trails.
- Educational programs and activities.
- Natural habitat protection.
- Restoration of historic structures.
- Safety and protection of visitors.

A year after the BLM began collecting fees at Red Rock Canyon, critics accused the bureau of "creative accounting" to offset federal budget reductions. At the

time, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., said using the fees to offset budget cuts violated the congressional intent behind the pilot program.

Things changed under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004, which allowed fee revenue to be used for the management and operations of the sites where fees are collected.

The October 2007 draft budget planning report breaks down costs for 54 BLM staff positions in a list titled, "Recreation Fee Demo Projects."

Taylor, for example, was projected to spend about one-tenth of his time on management and oversight of Red Rock Canyon, or about 176 hours for a cost of about \$11,248. The figure included benefits and other expenses related to his employment.

Most of Taylor's other work is devoted to management of wilderness areas, Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area and recreation programs for the field office.

For comparison, the time that law enforcement ranger Kelly Cole devoted to Red Rock Canyon was 804 hours, which translated to about \$38,335 reimbursed by fees, according to the draft report.

About half of Cole's patrol time is spent at Sloan Canyon, and the figure doesn't include the cost of equipment, training, and a law enforcement vehicle.

The report said the total estimate for 54 BLM staff members, including placeholders such as the vacant "budget analyst" position was \$741,988.81.

Contact reporter Keith Rogers at [krogers@reviewjournal.com](mailto:krogers@reviewjournal.com) or 702-383-0308.