

Nov. 13, 2008
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

Couple protest fee hike plan

Proposal covers Red Rock Canyon, Bird Creek

By KEITH ROGERS
REVIEW-JOURNAL

One couple from Colorado showed up Wednesday afternoon to comment before a public lands panel on federal plans to increase fees at Red Rock Canyon and charge for camping at Bird Creek near Ely.

"There's not a lot of working people who can be at these meetings, and this is a long way from Ely," said Kitty Benzar, an organizer of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, a nonprofit group.

The coalition is "in touch with thousands of people" who share concerns about access, said Benzar, who had traveled from Durango, Colo., with her husband, Brian, to attend the half-day meeting at the Gold Coast. The fee proposal was made by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.

Campground fees are not the issue, but day use and entrance fees are, the Benzars said.

In a September analysis, titled "The Fix Is In," the coalition found the process for setting fees on Western public lands is tilted in favor of government agencies.

"Ordinary families and working people, who make up the majority of National Forest and BLM visitors, are being shut out of the decision making by a process that is intentionally difficult to participate in," the report said. It said the law that allows for fee increases "is bad law and bad policy and the ... coalition once again calls on Congress to repeal it."

"Congress must act soon, before the heritage of public ownership of public lands is lost to Americans forever," the 18-page report said.

The citizens panel, which is a recreation subcommittee of the BLM's three resource advisory councils, will play a key role in making recommendations on adjusting fees based on proposals and business plans the agencies will draft and put out for comment in January.

After two public meetings in Las Vegas next year, the fee adjustments, if approved, could be started as early as January 2010.

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

Mary Jo Rugwell, the BLM's Southern Nevada district manager, said the bureau needs to charge entrance fees at Red Rock Canyon because the appropriated amount is not nearly enough for operating the scenic national conservation area.

"I don't know how we could run the area safely and effectively without the fees," Rugwell said.

The economic downturn in Southern Nevada will be factored into a decision on how much to adjust fees. The amount of any possible increase has not been determined, she said.

"It's not our goal to make it tougher on folks. Our goal is to keep things safely operating," Rugwell said.

The Forest Service is proposing an \$8 per night camping fee for one of four available sites at Bird Creek Picnic Area. The area is currently a reservation-only picnic area that charges a minimum of \$35 per day for up to 25 people.

Contact reporter Keith Rogers at krogers@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0308.

Find this article at:

<http://www.lvrj.com/news/34385799.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal, 1997 - 2008

Go Green! Subscribe to the electronic Edition at www.reviewjournal.com/ee/