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Group links fees to drop in forest visits

No-Fee Coalition: Paying to use public land driving people away

by Dale Rodebaugh
Herald Staff Writer

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The president of a Durango-based organization says charging for recreation on public lands is the reason for a decline in the number of visitors to national forests. But Forest Service officials say the explanation isn't that simple.

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Benzar

Kitty Benzar of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition points to a recent Forest Service report that shows national forest visits declined an average 13 percent across the country from 2004 to 2007. The change in the Forest Service's nine regions ranged from a break-even level in New Mexico and Arizona and a 5 percent decline in the Rocky Mountain region to a 24 percent decline in the Northeast and 27 percent drop in Oregon and Washington.

The Columbine District in the San Juan National Forest recorded a 10 percent drop in the number of visitors at developed campgrounds this year compared with 2007, said district recreation specialist Richard

Spiegel.

The Rocky Mountain region includes Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas and South Dakota.

"The quarrel isn't over a charge for developed campgrounds where you're paying for exclusive use - and the amount isn't important," Benzar, who lives in Durango, said Monday. "The problem is charging for parking, trail use, scenic overlooks, picnic areas and hiking - areas anyone can use."

Benzar was one of five people who testified in June before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on parks, national forests and public lands. Their testimony covered recreation fees, accountability of fee revenue and the exclusion of the public from fee decisions.

Jim Bedwell, the Forest Service's national director of recreation, sees the decline in national forest use as sociological phenomenon. The number of traditional users - the older set - is declining and the younger generation is more interested in sports or computers, he said.

"We have a more urban population with diversified interests," Bedwell said by telephone from Washington. "We don't see any correlation between fees and national forest use."

Pam DeVore, head of the National Visitor Use Monitoring Program for the Rocky Mountain Region, said by telephone from Denver there is no single explanation for the decline in national forest visitation. Wilderness areas where there is no fee have seen big declines in the number of visitors while some areas that charge fees have registered big increases.

"It (the decline) could be attributed to the overall economic downturn, the price of gasoline, the weather or a shift away from outdoor recreation," DeVore said. "It's hard to say there's a single reason for the trend."

An additional factor, DeVore said, is that while each national forest conducts user surveys, they're not done every year or the same year. Statistics from the Arapahoe-Roosevelt and the Rio Grande national forests

reflect 2005 activity; surveys in the San Juan and the Pike-San Isabel national forests were done in 2006; the Routt and White River national forests conducted surveys in 2007; statistics from the Grand Mesa-Uncompahgre-Gunnison national forest were gathered this year.

The first report using the current and more methodical visitor-count system - released in September 2002 - showed that 214 million people visited national parks the year before. The earlier counting method had proved unreliable, producing wildly inaccurate figures, including 859 million visitors to national forests in 1996 and 885 million in 1997.

The latest report shows the number of visitors to national forests in the Rocky Mountain region declined 5 percent, from 32,500 in 2004 to 31,025 in 2007. The drop wasn't nearly as precipitous as in others preserves across the country.

The San Juan National Forest stretches from Pagosa Springs to Montezuma County, and the Columbine District includes about the middle third of the San Juan. The Columbine District's 10 percent decline was measured only at developed campgrounds.

"I can speak about developed campgrounds because we see the receipts," Spiegel said. "I don't know about the hiking trails or the wilderness."

Spiegel cited the cost of gasoline as a possible cause for the decline in the number of visitors. The decline in tourism, which is tied to transportation costs, appears to have had repercussions across the board, he said, noting that Mesa Verde National Park and the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad also had fewer visitors. The Forest Service's Public Lands Center satellite office in Silverton saw fewer visitors who ride the train from Durango, he said.

The San Juan National Forest has 18 developed campgrounds where fees for an overnight stay range from \$8 to \$15. But Benzar doesn't quibble with the charge. Among particularly irksome charges, she said, is a \$10 fee to visit the top of 14,264-foot Mount Evans west of Denver. She also doesn't like the fee to picnic at Haviland Lake north of Durango.

Bedwell said stopping on Mt. Evans to look or take photos doesn't cost anything. Fees are related to a visitors center and a related nature trail there, he said.

The hearing before the House subcommittee didn't produce reform, said Benzar, whose reading of the fee-authorization law concludes that some Forest Service recreational fees are unauthorized. She and others are working with legislators in hopes that the next Congress will resume hearings on the issue.

daler@durangoherald.com