

Budget failures force Prescott National Forest to raise fees

MAGGIE AVANTS WEDNESDAY, 24 DECEMBER 2008

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Free Wednesdays and a \$40 annual pass remain as consolations.

Prescott National Forest officials are passing budget deficits to the public by raising camping and day-use fees beginning January 1, 2009.

“We went through a state review and we were approved,” said PNF Recreation Program Manager Bruce Fahrni. “The good thing though is that we still offer annual passes for \$40. We did not change those prices, and we still offer free Wednesdays at all our day use sites.”

Fees will increase for several area day use sites and campgrounds due to budget deficits PNF has faced in past years, according to officials. Beginning January 1, day-use sites including Thumb Butte will more than double from the present \$2 to \$5, and campgrounds, including Lynx Lake and Granite Basin, will nearly double from the present \$10 to \$18.

Officials said PNF spends \$396,903 annually to operate and maintain these sites, but fee revenues in 2007 were only \$311,127, roughly 78 percent needed.

PNF can raise its fees under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004, which permits federal land management agencies to collect user fees as revenue. After several years of charging fees as a “demonstration” program, the US Forest Service made the fees permanent by quietly attaching a rider to another bill, a process in which the public had no opportunity to comment.

But, in order to proceed with the increase, the Forest Service had to first issue a proposal and invite the public to comment. Rachel Franchina of the US Forest Service conducted the PNF survey from May to June of this year. Franchina said she frequented the recreation sites, asking users what they thought of the proposed fee hike. She also kept track of responses the public e-mailed to the PNF web site.

“The responses I got were mixed,” Franchina said. “I would say it was about 50/50 in favor of the increase.”

Some said they would no longer be able to visit the sites that they already paid for with their taxes. Others said they would be willing to pay because they understood the rising costs of maintenance. Still others thought that, despite the

Day use fees will increase to \$5.00 at the following sites:

- Alto Pit OHV
- Cayuse Equestrian Trailhead
- Granite Basin Boat Launch
- Granite Basin Picnic Site
- Hayfield Draw OHV
- Lynx Creek Ruins
- Lynx Lake North Shore
- Lynx lake South Shore Picnic Site
- Metate Trailhead
- Mingus Lake
- Mingus Picnic Site
- Playa

economic downturn, \$5 was a reasonable fee to pay for activities.

PNF Public Relations Officer Debbie Maneely said that, with the amenities they are offering, PNF officials believe it is a fair price.

Once officials completed the survey, they presented the findings to the Arizona Bureau of Land Management's Resource Advisory Committee (RAC), which approved the increase.

"The Forest Service did a good job in justifying the forest-wide increase and engaging the public," said RAC board member Deborah Stevens. She added that, while the September meeting was open to the public, no citizens were on hand to oppose the fees.

In its May proposal, PNF officials contended that "[The increase] would help the Forest maintain current services and support planned projects." Past projects included new facilities at Thumb Butte and a new group fire ring at Upper Wolf Creek Group Campground. Future projects include a covered host site and group picnic area at Groom Creek Horse Camp, and a new fee station at Hilltop Campground.

Officials pointed out that their fee sites "provide comfort, safety and convenience to a broad spectrum of visitors," and that the fees to use them will not increase for at least another five years. Fees last rose in 1998.

Maneely said that, although the Forest Service fees will increase as scheduled, the public should know there are still several dispersed campgrounds in the Prescott Basin area that are free of charge.

"Many people don't know about the dispersed sites that are out there," she said. "They may not have restrooms and other comforts, but they are free."

PNF's holdings don't include most of Prescott's lakes. The fees for using Goldwater Lake, Willow Lake and Watson Lake will remain the same, as the City of Prescott, not the Forest Service, manages the three lakes.

"Our sites are still \$2 per car for day use, and \$10 to camp," said City Lakes Manager Diana Fister. "It would be up to the City Council and its budget to raise those fees, and so far I haven't heard anything about them doing that."

For a full list of recreation sites affected and for a map of dispersed camping, visit the [Prescott National Forest's Web site](#).

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Thumb Butte
Wekuvde

Campground fees will increase as follows with an additional 2nd vehicle charge of \$ 5.00:

Hazlett Hollow - \$10.00
Lower Wolf Creek - \$10.00
Mingus Mountain - \$10.00/
\$14.00 w/electricity
Groom Creek Horse Camp -
\$18.00
Hilltop - \$18.00
Lynx Lake - \$18.00/\$36.00
Potato Patch - \$14.00/
\$28.00/18.00 w/electricity
White Spar - \$14.00
Yavapai - \$18.00/\$36.00

Group Recreation Site fees will increase as follows:

Granite Basin Group -
\$75.00-\$150.00
Playground Group - \$75.00-
\$150.00
Turney Gulch Group -
\$75.00-\$150.00
Upper Wolf Creek Group -
\$75.00-\$150.00
Thumb Butte Group Picnic -
\$85.00-\$175.00