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Forest officials back off proposed fee increases

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New fees and fee increases proposed at developed forest recreation sites across the Northern Region are being reconsidered.

"Given the economic situation, is this something we want to push forward with?" asked Dave Bull, director of recreation for Region One, which includes Montana, northern Idaho and the Dakota Grasslands.

Forest Service officials couldn't say what factors would be used in determining whether to implement the fees, or when the decisions would be made.

The Northern Region's reluctance to raise fees comes as Bull acknowledged that officials had been planning for new fees at 32 improved sites across the region over the next five years, including at four sites on the Custer National Forest near Billings.

Fees also could be increased at campgrounds and cabins, while others would be closed.

The proposed increases have attracted attention from lawmakers.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., introduced a bill in 2007 that would have repealed the act under which the Forest Service charges recreation fees. The bill will be reintroduced this session, a spokesman said.

"Absolutely Max is going to take another run at the (Recreational Access Tax)," said Barrett Kaiser.

"He feels Montanans already pay with their taxes and shouldn't be taxed twice."

Kaiser said any new fees implemented by the Forest Service would prompt a "negative reaction" from Baucus.

Kitty Benzar, of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition in Colorado, has been a critic of the Forest Service's recreational fee power and how it goes about soliciting public comment on its proposals.

"I have a problem with them spending taxpayer dollars for improvements and then charging fees," Benzar said. "In some cases they are doing more to the national forest than most people

want."

She equated the scenario to a landowner fixing up an apartment and then raising the tenant's rent, whether the tenant can afford the improvements or not.

"If everyone is happy and behind it, that's great," she said. "But I don't see that happening very often."

Benzar said more than 700 fee increases and 400 new fees have been initiated by the agency under the act.

The Forest Service was given power to initiate, collect and keep a portion of the fees under the 2005 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

Before that, forest fees went to Congress and were then sent back in appropriations.

According to Benzar, the act has prompted the Forest Service to collect more money than it needs to maintain and operate its sites, pressuring the agency to spend the money or lose it.

"It's a vicious cycle, and Congress has been taken out of the circle," Benzar said.

Benzar is also critical of public involvement in the agency's process, saying that few people are aware of the increases until they visit their favorite campground. She's critical of the Forest Service's use of the Bureau of Land Management's Recreation Advisory Committees in Montana to review the Forest Service's proposals.

Mark Albers, field manager for the BLM's Malta office, said that last year the Forest Service wasn't good about providing advance information to its Resource Advisory Committee, but that it's doing a better job this year.

Bull, of the Northern Region, said the agency goes out of its way to notify the public by posting signs at sites, posting notices in newspapers, holding public meetings and letting the RACs consider the proposals.

The committees have the power to kill the fee increases.

"I think there's ample opportunity for the public to be engaged," Bull said.

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