

Grand Junction Daily Sentinel  
Editorial

## **How do we manage to manage public lands?**

By Bob Silbernagel

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The business of managing public lands is messy, somewhat akin to the sausage making of legislatures. And Congress frequently makes it worse.

Take the Rec Rac, for instance. More on that unfortunate acronym in a bit.

For more than 30 years, I've observed and written about federal employees and citizen volunteers who struggle to make responsible decisions on the use of public lands. Most of the time, members of the public are drastically divided over what the proper management prescription should be, and each side is vehement that its idea is the only appropriate one. Always, there is a web of often-conflicting laws for the decision makers to wade through.

Although I have disagreed with the decisions made on many occasions, I have a great respect for the federal employees and citizen volunteers who try to find the best way to manage our public lands.

Sometimes, however, you just have to shake your head at the layers of rules dropped on those trying to formulate land-management policy.

A case in point is the Rec Rac — or Recreation Resource Advisory Committee — which examines fee proposals related to recreation on public lands for both Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service lands.

The Colorado Rec Rac was the subject of discussion last week during a joint meeting of all of the BLM Resource Advisory Councils in Colorado.

For readers not well-versed in public-lands acronyms, the resource advisory councils, or RACs (not to be confused with the Rec Rac) were created during the Clinton administration to advise the BLM. There are three resource advisory councils in Colorado, each with 15 members — the Front Range RAC, the Southwest RAC and the Northwest RAC, which includes Mesa County. Representatives from this community include Mike Perry with the Museum of Western Colorado, conservationist Charles Kerr and mountain-bike enthusiast Pat Kennedy. There are also ranchers, off-road vehicle users and oil-and-gas industry representatives on the RAC.

They examine issues and offer the BLM recommendations on topics ranging from grazing to gas drilling to recreation.

That's right, recreation. These groups, with citizens representing a wide array of interests, already provide recommendations to the BLM regarding things like recreation fees. So why is another bureaucratic beast such as the Rec Rac necessary?

Gene King, a Denver-area resident and member of the Front Range RAC, left little doubt during the combined RAC meeting Wednesday what he thought of the issue.

“The reason we have this is that it was stuck in an omnibus bill by a congressman from Ohio, I believe, without any public input,” he said. “And now we're stuck with this piece of crap.”

I couldn't find evidence of who the congressman was, but King was otherwise correct about the origins of the Rec Racs. They were created through the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which was included in the 2005 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, according to a federal Web site.

They were in response to what was then a broad grass-roots effort that included people in western Colorado who objected to a federal fee demonstration program then being implemented on federal lands. The Rec Racs were to provide another opportunity for people to offer input on recreational fees and create consistency on how and when they are implemented.

But Colorado's has proved to be a slow-moving entity, even when there is public support for the fee proposals under consideration.

For example, Catherine Robertson, the manager of the Grand Junction Field Office for the BLM, has submitted two proposals for fees in this area. One would raise the fee at the Mud Springs Campground from \$5 to \$10 per camp site. The other would institute a new \$10 camping fee at the camping area in the North Fruita Desert.

Not only did the BLM get support from the Northwest RAC for both fee increases, but for the North Fruita Desert fee, it obtained letters of support from the city of Fruita, the Mesa County commissioners and local mountain bikers who are the main users of the camp sites. However, the Colorado Rec Rac has so far dithered on making a recommendation regarding the fee increases.

Then there is the question of how much authority the Rec Rac has. One member of the group who was present at last week's joint meeting said the Rec Rac's decisions can only be overturned by the secretary of the Interior Department. Others believe that, like the regional resource advisory councils, Rec Rac decisions are only recommendations. The BLM and Forest Service can overrule them if they choose.

The bit of legislation in the omnibus appropriations bill may have been inserted with good intentions — to allow more public input on recreation fees and provide consistency on when fees should be charged and how much they can be. But Congress did public lands managers and citizens who work with them no favors by including it.

There are already many opportunities for public input, not least through the regional resource advisory committees. The Rec Rac is an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy that only adds to the analysis paralysis that infects so much public lands management.

## Comments

Mr Silbernagel:

You're absolutely right that the RecRACs need to go, along with the entire law that established them, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. Like Fee Demo before it, the FLREA has done nothing but mischief to the way our public lands are managed. Last week Colorado Counties Inc. called on the Colorado delegation to work for its repeal, and a bill to accomplish that was cosponsored in the Senate by then-Senator, now Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar. Much information about the way the law was slipped in as a rider on an appropriations bill, the harm it has done, and the efforts to repeal it, is available at [www.WesternSlopeNoFee.org](http://www.WesternSlopeNoFee.org). I recommend you especially to our [analysis report]([http://www.westernslopenofee.org/pdfuploads/RRAC\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.westernslopenofee.org/pdfuploads/RRAC_White_Paper.pdf)) exposing the RecRAC process nationwide as the obstacle to public participation that it is. Now please allow me to clarify a few uncertainties and answer a few of the questions you posed in your editorial.

You wrote: \*"The reason we have this is that it was stuck in an omnibus bill by a congressman from Ohio, I believe, without any public input," he said. "And now we're stuck with this piece of crap." I couldn't find evidence of who the congressman was, but King was otherwise correct about the origins of the Rec Racs.\*

The congressman was Ralph Regula, who represented the Canton, Ohio area until he retired at the end of the last session of Congress. His former district does not contain a single acre of federally managed public land.

You wrote: \*However, the Colorado Rec Rac has so far dithered on making a recommendation regarding the fee increases.\*

Actually, the BLM's proposed increases near Grand Junction have so far not been on the agenda of the Colorado RecRAC. They can hardly be accused of "dithering" on something that has never been presented to them.

You wrote: \*Then there is the question of how much authority the Rec Rac has. One member of the group who was present at last week's joint meeting said the Rec Rac's decisions can only be overturned by the secretary of the Interior Department. Others believe that, like the regional resource advisory councils, Rec Rac decisions are only recommendations. The BLM and Forest Service can overrule them if they choose.\* According to the law, the RecRAC submits recommendations to either the Secretary of Interior (BLM) or Secretary of Agriculture (Forest Service). The law then says that "If the Secretary rejects the recommendation of a Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, the Secretary shall issue a notice that identifies the reasons for rejecting the recommendation to the Committee on Resources of the House of Representatives and the

Committee on Energy and Natural Resources of the Senate not later than 30 days before the Secretary implements a decision pertaining to that recommendation."

The FLREA must be repealed, and the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition continues to work toward that goal. We welcome your support.

Kitty Benzar, President, Western Slope No-Fee Coalition