

LOIS HENRY

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Lois Henry: Can't see the forest for the fees



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I've said this before and it never ceases to be true: giving government agencies near-total control with virtually zero accountability is always — always — a bad idea.

Sequoia National Forest Southern Sierra Pass

The Southern Sierra Pass is now required year round if you want to fish or camp at the Auxiliary Dam, Old Isabella and South Fork areas along Isabella Lake.

There is also now a day use fee for Camp 9 across the lake. Camping is an additional charge.

Cost is \$10 per day for each vehicle, up from \$5 per vehicle.

You may buy an annual pass for \$50 (up from \$30) plus \$10 for a second vehicle, if needed.

Passes may be purchased at any Forest Service district office or at the Golden State Surplus store in Lake Isabella.

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This axiom is playing itself out again in the Kern River Valley where Sequoia National Forest Service officials have earned the community's ire by bumping up day use and camping fees.

Everyone knows it costs money to keep up with the potties, trash and vandalism massive crowds bring with them over the summer.

What's sticking in residents' craws, however, is this:

- The Forest Service isn't keeping up with trash, sanitation and vandalism.
- It isn't providing better amenities.
- It hasn't properly accounted for fees it's collected and spent over the last several years.

And, in the process of doubling its fees on several sites, it also proposed a host of new fee sites

the community feared would ensnare the whole lake and upper Kern River into a scheme that would have seen visitors charged \$10 for parking to snap a few pictures.

Oh yeah, and residents tell me they are fed up with the lack of communication, doublespeak and outright misleading information they've been given by Forest Service officials over this issue.

Hmmm. An agency with little to no oversight, absolutely in charge of a vast area being unilateral and uncommunicative? Shocking! The local issues mirror problems nationwide — but more on that later.

Because of community outrage, the Forest Service has since backed off creating new fee sites around the lake and upper river — for now.

It did succeed late last year in doubling camping and day-use fees to \$10 per vehicle year-round, rather than the old May to September system, at the Auxiliary Dam, Old Isabella Road and South Fork sites. You'll also now have to pay \$10 for day use at Camp 9 across the lake.

Fishing for answers

I spent a day recently at the lake talking to fishermen and others about the fees.

Ed Strange, who lives in Onyx, had heard about the new fees. He normally buys a year-round sticker for his car, which used to be \$35 and is now \$50.

"I don't like it real well," Strange said of the fee. "Fishing is a great experience and it's, well, it used to be, a cheap, fun thing to do with your family."

Mostly, Strange was confused about where and when the fees applied.

Kern River Valley residents have been trying to get information and accounting from the Forest Service for months. They had one large and very angry town hall meeting last summer, after which the Forest Service backed away from its plan to encircle the lake in its Southern Sierra Pass program.

Then in early February, Forest Service officials again met with residents to try and show how fees have been used thus far.

It didn't go well.

Close enough for government work

It should not be that hard to break down how much the forest gets from Congress, how much from fees and how both pots of money are spent in the three districts that make up the Sequoia (Kern River, Western Divide and Hume Lake).

But leave it to government.

I won't bore you with all the details but here's just a small taste:

According to the Forest Service power point presented at the February meeting, the Kern River district brought in \$191,900 in fees in 2008 and spent \$273,450. When I asked how the difference was made up, Forest Service officials said it was "carryover" fee money.

But the 2007 carryover fee money on their power point, \$112,561, is based on the fiscal year (Oct.1 to Sept. 30) and the fee collection and expenditures are based on the calendar year, so there's no way to see if income and outgo tally up.

In fairness, the Sequoia National Forest did not create this alleged accounting system.

And Mary Cole, who coordinates the forest fee program in the Sequoia, told me they're working to correct that and other discrepancies I noted.

Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell told me they've purchased a new accounting system (which soaked up \$24,000 in recreation fees) and hope it will help sort out accounting problems.

Services going down the toilet

OK, switching gears, I wanted to see if locals' grumbling that the Forest Service was dropping the ball on services had any truth.

Short answer: Yes.

I looked at the number of porta-potties in the "high impact recreation areas" (HIRAs) as the Forest Service has designated the fee sites along the lake, at Auxiliary Dam, South Fork and Old Isabella, where fees have been doubled and which are elbow to elbow with people in summer.

In one document, the Forest Service gave me, it shows there were 13 porta potties in 2007 and 28 in 2008. OK, good.

Except another document shows that in 2002-2005 there were 32 porta potties then and in 2006-2008 there were only 13. So what gives?

Turns out they had planned to buy more potties but had to use the money for their emergency fire fund, according to Cole.

Uh, so we only have 13 porta potties for a two-mile stretch of beach that attracts up to 4,000 people on holiday summer weekends? Ick.

Even so, I understand. Fire comes first.

But it's funny how that wasn't in documents given to the public.

No head for numbers

This drama is just one small piece of the Forest Service fee program, which started about 10 years ago as a "demonstration" project to make up for shortfalls in tax money. In 2005, the demo fees became permanent under the Recreation Enhancement Act.

It's been controversial and poorly managed right from the start.

In two separate 2003 reports by the General Accounting office the Forest Service was skewered for its bad accounting.

Overall, the GAO's office said, the Forest Service could not give a clear picture of what exactly it does with its 30,000 employees and \$5 billion annual budget.

Looking specifically at how fees had been managed, the GAO said accounting was so bad the public could not trust how the Forest Service had spent its money.

Seems things haven't improved in the last six years.

Public lands not quite so public

Bob Barsch, founder of Free our Forests, which vehemently opposed the Adventure Pass when it

was imposed on national forests in Southern California, said the Forest Service has far exceeded its legal authority to charge the public to access its own lands.

The 2005 law states that in order to charge fees, agencies must provide paved parking, toilets, trash, interpretive signs or kiosks, picnic tables and security. Instead, the Forest Service created "high impact recreation areas" (HIRAs) in which a line is drawn around a large area that may have those services but not all in one spot.

So your toilet could be a mile from your picnic table which could be another mile to the trash, but it's all considered one so-called HIRA and that means you have to pay up. In the Angeles and Los Padres national forests south of Kern County HIRAs cover more 200,000 acres, including the popular winter play area near Mount Pinos.

"When it comes to the point that we need a permit to walk on our own public land, we've lost a major piece of our freedom," Barsch said.

It would be one thing if he saw improvements or even adequate accounting, but he sees neither, contending that volunteers mostly keep up the trails (Kern River Valley residents said the same of cleaning trash around Isabella Lake). And, he said, trash and vandalism are taken care of only minimally. Ditto in the Kern River Valley, according to residents.

Barsch fought for three years against the fees, even getting cited seven times for handing out information to forest visitors. Last year, he watched as legislation to repeal the fees didn't even make it to the House floor.

"The older generation, we tried our best, but government doesn't care what the people think, they'll do what they want."

Which brings me back to the start of this column: Control without accountability are never a good mix.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenry@bakersfield.com



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