



TIME TO START OVER WITH SENSIBLE FEE POLICY

## Baucus, Crapo Re-introduce Bill to Repeal the RAT

*Since the Bush administration endorsed the current fee-charging policy and arranged for the RAT to become the law of the land without a congressional vote, the re-introduced bill should face a brighter future with the Obama administration and the new, blue Congress.*

By Bill Schneider, 4-22-09

Tomorrow, Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) will take another swing at the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA)--or Recreation Access Tax (RAT) to its detractors--by re-introducing their bill that died last year at the end of the 110th Congress, which would repeal FLREA.

“Every tax day we pay to use our public lands, we shouldn’t be taxed twice to go fishing, hiking, or camping on OUR public lands, Baucus told *NewWest.Net* today. “Paying twice just doesn’t make any sense. That’s why I’m going to fight to get this bill passed.”



Back in December 2004, in the waning hours of the 108th Congress, a month after George W Bush was re-elected, Ralph Regula (R-OH) attached FLREA as a rider to a must-pass omnibus spending bill and presto, the RAT was the law of the land with no direct vote of Congress and minimal opportunity for public input.

Since then, federal agencies, especially the Forest Service (FS), have been in a frenzy creating and raising fees for use and access to federal lands. Idaho and Montana have had fewer fees and fee increases than most states because the FS knew their local senators didn’t support the fee-charging policy to pay for use and access of land owned by all Americans, believing instead that people pay for this on April 15 every year. But in most other states with significant acreages of national forests such as Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon and Washington fees have experienced a steady increase in fees since 2004

“If people are going to care about our natural resources,” Kitty Bazar, President of the primary nonprofit group working to repeal FLREA, the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition told *NewWest.Net*, “they have to get outdoors and experience nature, and they shouldn’t have to buy a ticket to look at a tree. The stress we are all under in the current economy underscores the importance of simple joys like going for a walk in the woods without having to weigh how much that costs.

“As fee programs have grown and multiplied, visitation to public lands has fallen,” she noted. “That hurts us because we spend too much time indoors, and it hurts local economies that depend on visitors coming to enjoy the public lands. But it has also hurt the public lands agencies, because they are slowly but steadily losing their constituency of people who care whether they have the

resources they need to do a good job.

“The Fee Repeal Bill is a great step toward restoring the access to nature that we all need and deserve,” Benzar concluded. “The best things in life used to be free, and it’s high time they were again.”

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