

Kern Valley Sun (Kernville, CA)

Baucus bill proposes USFS fee rollback

May 5, 2009

Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) introduced legislation that would block the U.S. Forest Service and other federal agencies from charging higher fees to access their public lands. S.868 The Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act of 2009 was offered up on April 27, with Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho as lead cosponsor. The bill would revoke authority given to the Forest Service in 2004 to institute new fees and increase existing fees at campgrounds, trailheads, and other public areas.

Specifically, the bill repeals the Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act (FLREA), sometimes called the recreational access tax, and reinstates legislation dating back to 1965 that limits the use of fees on public lands.

Baucus, a long-time critic of the fees, said the current system amounts to double taxation.

"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 said. "Paying twice just doesn't make any sense."

Montana Senator Jon Tester also cosponsored the legislation. "Raising fees on hardworking families who want to enjoy their public land isn't a card we should be playing," said Tester, who serves as vice chairman of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus. "Americans already pay their share for our national forests every April 15. This bill is just common sense."

Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, hailed the bill.

"This is an exciting step toward restoring access to public lands for all Americans, and not just access for those who can afford to pay extra," Benzar said.

"I'm pleased and grateful for Senator Baucus's support and we will work hard to get this bill passed and signed into law."

Baucus' bill would repeal the FLREA, reinstate the fee authorities established by the 1965 Land and Water Conservation Act and reinstate the National Parks Pass system. Additionally, the bill would cap the amount that can be charged for entrance to national parks.

Baucus and Crapo introduced similar legislation in 2007.

The Source Weekly in Bend, Ore. printed an article describing how the Recreation Resource Advisory Committee process, which is supposed to ensure public participation in fee decisions, works.

The article, penned by Mike Bookey, focuses on Smith Rock State Park, and the Skull Hollow Campground, a small collection of picnic-table-and-fire-pit camp sites nestled amongst brush and scattered trees.

The link to Source Weekly article is at

www.tsweekly.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4195&Itemid=75.

The events in Skull Hollow Campground mirror recent proposals put forth by Tina Terrell, Sequoia National Forest Supervisor and District Ranger Rick Larsen.

May 13 meeting to present SNF finances

On May 13, Forest Service regional officials in San Francisco (Vallejo) will be presenting the finances of the Sequoia National Forest to the California Recreation Resource Advisory Committee. This is the committee that last summer, under the urging of Forest Service officials, recommended a virtual doubling of fees for access to the Lake Isabella "HIRA."

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/passes/rrac/meetings/>

As of presstime Tuesday, Congressman Kevin McCarthy had not yet responded to the Sun's request for comment.