



Baucus pushing repeal of rec fees

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By *ROB CHANEY of the Missoulian*

One throwback to the 1960s that outdoors enthusiasts might appreciate is an old way of managing U.S. Forest Service trailheads and campsites.

That's the era Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., looked to in his effort to replace the 2004 Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act, often called the Recreational Access Tax or RAT fee.

His Senate Bill 868 would repeal the fee system and replace it with a 1965 policy limiting charges on public lands.

The Forest Service has collected fees at campgrounds, recreation areas and other public facilities for years. But the 2004 act set up a series of "demonstration fee areas" where additional dollars could be added to the bill to underwrite improvements or catch up on maintenance.

In the Forest Service's Northern Region, the only areas with demonstration fees were at Lake Como in the Bitterroot National Forest and Hebgen Lake in the Gallatin National Forest. The region includes forests in Montana, northern Idaho and northeastern Washington, and national grasslands in North Dakota and northwestern South Dakota.

"Every tax day we pay to use our public lands," Baucus said in a statement. "We shouldn't be taxed twice to go fishing, hiking, or camping on our public lands."

Baucus and Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho authored a similar bill in 2007, but it didn't make it out of committee. This year's version is already scheduled in the Natural Resources and Energy Committee. Montana's Sen. Jon Tester, a Democrat, also co-sponsored the latest version.

Forest Service visits dropped 15 percent between 2004 and 2007 in the Northern Region, according to figures compiled by the Western Slope No Fee Coalition of Colorado. The year before the fees were instituted, there were 13.2 million visits in the region. Two years after the fees, the total was down to 11.2 million visits.

Forest Service officials were considering increasing fees at 32 sites in the Northern Region over the coming five years, but delayed those plans in January.

"If we charge fees at a site, those have amenities that are greater than a non-fee site," regional spokesman Mike Oliver said Monday. "We've been pretty conservative in how we applied fees."

For example, the Lake Como area had a separate fee-free parking lot set up for hikers who were heading for the backcountry instead of the lake beaches or campgrounds. Hikers had frequently complained about getting charged parking fees or receiving tickets when they weren't using the facilities.

“I ... feel that having to think about having money for parking in order to go on a hike on public land is ridiculous,” said Joshua Phillips, an organizer of club hikes and climbs around western Montana.

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