

# Lois Henry: This land is your land, for a fee

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Lame ideas have more lives than cats, I swear.

Glancing at the Sequoia National Forest's website, it appears the "ring around the lake" fee proposal is baaaack. Along with new proposed fee sites along the Kern River up to and including Lloyd Meadow.

Heck, why not just put a gate at the top of Highway 178 and charge an entrance fee? Oh, wait, since this is the PUBLIC'S land, that would be illegal, wouldn't it?

I'm not sure how making every square inch of useable space a fee site is any different, but then I don't work for the federal government.

Right now visitors must pay \$10 per vehicle for day or overnight use at three so-called HIRAs (High Impact Recreation Areas) -- Auxiliary Dam, Old Isabella Road and South Fork. This is all under the new year-round Southern Sierra Adventure Pass program.

Those are actual camping sites that are supposed to have certain amenities, such as garbage service, bathrooms and picnic tables, so the Forest Service can charge a fee.

Those things cost money and it makes sense to charge a little extra. Whether the forest service is actually providing the required amenities, however, is debatable.

Either way, if the "2009 Proposed" map (which you can find online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/sequoia/maps/maps/2009-proposed8x11.pdf>) comes to pass, it could mean you'd have to pay \$10 to stop and dip your toes in the water for a few minutes.

Last summer, Kern River Valley residents hit the roof when they first heard about a similar proposal.

They blasted the Forest Service for wanting more fee sites when conditions at current sites were awful with garbage strewn everywhere, filthy bathrooms (if there were any at all) without any significant Forest Service presence.

On top of all that, the Forest Service couldn't account for how it's been spending fees it had already been charging the public.

When I say officials couldn't account for those fees, I mean the numbers on the charts they gave the public didn't add up and they mixed up calendar and fiscal year monies.

There was NO accountability.

The Forest Service quickly pulled back its ring-around-the-lake proposal and Forest Supervisor Tina Terrell told me several months ago she had no intention of bringing it back up until the money issues were sorted out.

To that end, she told me and the public, Sequoia National Forest had spent \$24,000 (yes, using public fees) on a software program called CASH, which she said would follow the income and outgo of those fees.

Nope.

Turns out the CASH system, in use for the last decade on Southern California forests, will only track sales of Southern Sierra Adventure Passes, not how the Forest Service spends that money.

"That isn't really an accounting system that the Sequoia bought, it's the CASH system, which is a web-based system that tracks collections," Tamara Wilton, of the Forest Service's regional office in Vallejo, told a meeting of the Recreation Resource Advisory Committee on May 13. This is the same committee that OK'd doubling the HIRA fees and making them year-round at its meeting last fall.

Wilton also said during the meeting, according to audio tapes, that her staff spent 50 hours creating a method to track how fees on the Sequoia were spent in the first quarter of 2009.

And still there were problems.

Wilton didn't include the "real" total collections amounts because a percentage goes to administration. That percent is just left off the spreadsheets.

She also didn't calculate expenses associated with some rental incomes and itemized incomes and expenses for two campsites separately, except for the cost to collect fees for each site. She lumped that together so it's impossible to see which area made or lost money.

Sigh!

I wanted to ask Terrell, or anyone at the Sequoia National Forest, why the public was misled about the CASH system and also whether the the ring-around-the-lake HIRA proposal is something they'll be pursuing.

No one called me back.

I don't disagree that people should be charged for using some areas around the lake and river. They're pretty much loving it to death up there.

Lets face it, people are pigs. Cleaning up after them costs money.

But unless the Forest Service can A) show that it's doing that job and B) plainly tell us how it's using the public's money, allowing the service to conjure up more fee sites is absolutely out of the question.

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](http://people.bakersfield.com/home/Blog/noholdsbarred), call her at 395-7373 or e-mail [lhenry@bakersfield.com](mailto:lhenry@bakersfield.com)