



Fee needs fixing

Written by Baker City Herald Editorial Board July 10, 2009 02:38 pm

Used to be the only price you had to pay for the privilege of pulling a few trout from Anthony or Grande Ronde Lake was the cost of a fishing license.

This, at least, was fair, since the money goes to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Department, the agency that dumps fish in the lakes every year.

What's not fair is paying a \$6 fee if you go up to the lakes to practice your fly-casting technique and maybe grill some burgers.

Yet a flawed federal law passed in December 2004 allows such fees. It's the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

For the third consecutive summer, the private company that the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest hired to operate the campgrounds at Anthony and Grande Ronde lakes is charging a day-use fee to certain visitors who don't camp overnight. This year the fee, per vehicle not per person, is \$6, up from \$5 the past two summers.

Signs announce the fee, and it's also listed (although erroneously, as \$5) on the Wallowa-Whitman's Web site.

We don't object to the basic idea behind day-use fees. If contractors can't make a profit the Wallowa-Whitman might have to reduce services at campgrounds, or even close them.

But six bucks for a few hours of fishing or picnicking is exorbitant, particularly at places such as Anthony and Grande Ronde lakes where such activities were free for so many years.

You can pitch a tent and stay all night in either campground for just \$8, after all.

A \$6 daily fee is steep enough to convince some people to stay home rather than enjoy the public lands that, in theory, they've already paid for through their taxes.

The Wallowa-Whitman's contractor, Aud & Di Campground Services of Cedar City, Utah, cleans the restrooms and empties the garbage cans at the two lakes, among its other duties.

Obviously overnight campers aren't the only visitors who use those restrooms and trash cans.

But it stretches the limits of our credulity to believe that a person's "deposits" in a restroom and a garbage can during a few hours cost the contractor \$6 in expenses.

An official from Aud & Di said the company doesn't intend to charge the fee to people who, for instance, stroll around the lake for half an hour and then drive away.

That's fine, but what about visitors who see the sign and assume they have to pay regardless of what they do and how long they stay?

The 2004 law was designed to collect fees from people who use the amenities listed in the law, including restrooms and trash cans.

But people shouldn't have to pay if they don't use any of the amenities that the Wallowa-Whitman's contractor has to maintain.

For visitors who only hike the trails or fish the lakes, neither of which the contractor is responsible for, the day-use fee amounts to a tax for recreating on a national forest, a practice the 2004 law supposedly, and rightfully, forbids. National forests are not national parks.

Until Congress passes a bill repealing the 2004 law — such a bill was introduced this spring — the Wallowa-Whitman should do one of three things: 1) cancel day-use fees at Anthony and Grande Ronde; 2) figure out how to make it clear to visitors when they are not obligated to pay the fee, or; 3), cut the fee to \$1 to \$3 so people aren't priced out of hobbies that, for many local residents, have become traditions.

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