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Fees possibly on the rise at Green Mtn. Reservoir

Proposal still in the works

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SUMMIT COUNTY — User fees at Green Mountain Reservoir might see an increase next summer, but the proposal to restructure the fees is still in the works.

For the last seven years it has cost \$5 a day, or \$25 annually, to camp or hike at Green Mountain Reservoir. Two previous attempts to raise user fees at the reservoir were denied by an advisory committee.

The proposal in the works, however, started fresh.

“I came in and said, ‘let’s try something different,’” said Jan Cutts, district ranger with the Dillon Ranger District.

Over the winter, Cutts held meetings with a focus group of local business owners, users and others to generate ideas about what fees should be charged.

“We’ve taken that feedback and we’re developing it to take it to the public, then take it to the (advisory committee),” Cutts said. “We’re looking at where we can charge appropriate fees and for what. We need to figure out how we’re going to manage Green Mountain.”

“I left those meetings with a good feeling,” said Kitty Benzar of the Western Slope No Fee Coalition. Benzar, however, said she was unsure how much of the feedback would actually make it into the final proposal.

Part of the reason Green Mountain fees might go up is to fulfill staffing and maintenance needs.

To handle the 35,000 visitors Green Mountain typically gets a year, Forest Service ranger Ken Waugh said, “We need at least six people working throughout the summer.”

Last year four full-time and one part-time employee handled the load. This year that number of full-time employees was cut in half.

Still, Benzar said user fees aren’t the answer.

“There’s absolutely no reason they can’t meet their basic responsibilities with appropriated funding,” Benzar said, pointing out that the amount of money the Forest Service, but not necessarily the Dillon Ranger District, receives from Congress has increased 72 percent since 2000.

To raise Green Mountain’s user fees, the Forest Service will have to prove to an advisory committee that it has general public support. The advisory committee was supposed to have a walk-through to familiarize itself with Green Mountain Reservoir on July 11, but failed to publish the meeting as required. As a result, the site visit was canceled. Shortly after, four committee members’ terms expired, so those seats will need to be filled before any decision on Green Mountain can be made.

“The plan is to get something to the (advisory committee) by their winter meeting and hopefully get their approval for implementation next summer,” Cutts said.

Before then, the Dillon Ranger District plans to send out press releases and letters to people on their mailing list and host a public meeting or open house so people will have an opportunity to comment.

“We'll try to get the word out as far as possible,” Cutts said.

The big picture

In 2004, The Federal Recreation Enhancement Act replaced the fee-demo program. Under the recreation fee act, 80 percent of user fees stay on site and go toward day-to-day maintenance and other contracts. Fifteen percent is used for administrative management while the remaining 5 percent goes into a six-state regional office fund that is used for grants, which individual districts compete for.

The Western Slope No Fee Coalition, however, is supporting legislation to end fees and reinstate the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, which limited what fees could be charged for.

“We're not opposed to campground fees; when you pay for a campsite you get exclusive use for that piece of land,” Benzar said. “There's nothing exclusive about hiking on a trail.”

Without fees, however, funding could become more unpredictable.

“We would have to go to a private company to operate (Green Mountain) without fees,” said Rich Doak, White River National Forest recreation director.

Private companies operate Heaton Bay, and other Dillon Reservoir sites, so those user fees are not subject to advisory committee approval.

“Places like Heaton Bay got out of hand with prices,” said Frisco's John Jackson. “I think \$17 (a day) is too much, but I think \$25 for the season is more than reasonable.”

Lyle Gyvan of Idaho Springs said he didn't mind paying the \$5 user fee at Green Mountain because he had seen improvements over the last couple of years. “I don't mind paying if they use the money to enhance it,” Gyvan said.

Green Mountain recently received \$1.475 million from the American Recover and Reinvestment Act. That money will go toward facility improvements, like a centralized boat launching facility.

The stimulus money won't be used to help with day-to-day operations.

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