

[Report: Public not keen on Forest Service access fees](#)

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The U.S. Forest Service is under fire for skirting laws on public land access and recreation fees. In some places, the agency charges fees just to park and hike on public lands, but federal law requires that a certain level of service and specific amenities be provided for the fee. BOB BERWYN PHOTO.

Durango group claims Forest Service skirting fee laws by allowing private companies to charge for sub-standard facilities

By Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — The trend toward private management of U.S. Forest Service facilities isn't popular with the public, according to a new study released by the [Western Slope No-Fee Coalition](#).

The Durango-based group, which opposes recreation fees on public lands, [analyzed 4,000 public comments](#) on a recent Forest Service plan to cut senior discounts at campgrounds run by private contractors.

“Times are tough, give us a break,” was the closing sentence on one of the comments publicized in the report. Nearly all the comments were critical of the plan to cut senior discounts and many took issue with the creeping privatization of public lands and the appearance of recreation fees.

A handful of comments favoring the proposal came from people associated with the private companies that manage campgrounds as Forest Service permit-holders. In one case, the vice president of a Utah-based company that operates 32 facilities in 11 states (totaling 375,000 campground overnights) said the Forest Service should reimburse private companies to make up the difference from discounted camping fees.

The Forest Service says it depends on partnerships with private companies to keep camping and recreation facilities open and that budget realities prevent the agency from managing those facilities without partnerships.

In Summit County, a huge national company called [Thousand Trails](#) was awarded control of most major Forest Service campgrounds years ago with little public notice and input. The Forest Service says the partnership, under agency supervision, ensures a high level of service for campers.

In related news, the Dillon Ranger District also plans to eliminate parking and day-use fees at the Cataract Lake trail head, near Heeney, as part of its plan to revise the fee structure at Green Mountain Reservoir.

The agency dropped its proposal to cut the senior discounts from 50 percent to 10 percent after reviewing the comments, but Kitty Benzar, leader of the no-fee group, said the proposal showed how much influence private companies have over Forest Service policy. The comments also suggested that many campers would prefer that the campgrounds be run directly by Forest Service rangers.

The comments also showed that, if campgrounds are to be managed by private companies, the public wants consistency and transparency – of which the latter is hard to come by when the money flows directly into the pockets of for-profit companies. The decision to turn over hundreds of Forest Service campgrounds to private companies was made without much public involvement to begin with.

“We would like to stress that the decision whether or not to use a private concessionaire is made internally by the agency, without public input or comment,” Benzar wrote in the report. “Likewise, increases to concessionaire fees are approved administratively without undergoing the public participation and advisory committee approval that is required for increases to agency-collected fees,” she added.

Other concerns highlighted in the report is a fee ratcheting effect, whereby the Forest Service raises rates after pointing to the fees at nearby concession-operated campgrounds. Subsequently, those private permit-holders also seek to raise fees by pointing back at the increases at the Forest Service-managed facilities.

The no-fee group also charged that the Forest Service is skirting federal laws by allowing those private companies to charge fees that the agency itself is not allowed to — for parking and day-use at facilities that don’t meet federal requirements for fee areas.

In other cases, the Forest Service charges fees simply to access public lands in what appears to be a conflict with federal regulations requiring that a certain level of services and facilities be provided at fee areas.

Watch [this video](#) documenting the fee procedure on West Spanish Peak.

See [another video](#) on the fee program at Mt. Evans.