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Locals dispute access fees



Hikers stroll through Crescent Moon picnic area toward a sign announcing the required fee. (Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun)

By Cyndy Cole, Sun Staff Reporter

When is it legal to charge a fee for entering the Coconino National Forest in Sedona, and what should happen next with the agency's Red Rock Pass?

About 50 people, most of them locals, met with Red Rock District Ranger Heather Provencio and others from the Forest Service Tuesday in Sedona.

Most said they didn't want to pay for a pass to use the adjoining forest, or they wanted a free one, which wouldn't be legal, according to Provencio.

"I haven't seen any benefit from all the Red Rock passes," said mountain biker and chiropractor David Hart, adding that many of the trails were built and maintained by volunteers.

The pass costs \$5 a day or \$20 a year, with extra fees for specially managed areas, such as West Fork and Red Rock Crossing.

He objects to having one pass for many federal lands, and a second fee or pass required for access into federal lands managed by a private business.

"I don't think there should be a pass," Hart said. "If there's going to be one, there should be ONE."

SIX SCENARIOS

The Coconino National Forest has outlined six possible scenarios for Sedona. They include:

- No change
- Require visitors to most areas of the forest around Sedona to continue buying passes (generating \$1 million a year)
- Add "amenities" like picnic tables, restrooms, and parking to some trailheads and charge fees at those

- Require the pass in a smaller and more populated forest area
- Offer perhaps a dozen areas to a private business to manage as pay-to-use sites (currently, there are only three).
- Drop all fees.

LEGAL CHALLENGE

The Red Rock Pass is being re-evaluated because of a 2010 legal challenge.

Sedona backpacker Jim Smith was ticketed for parking at a trailhead without a Red Rock Pass, and he fought it.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark E. Aspey, of Flagstaff, sided with Smith on Sept. 14, 2010, dismissing his citation.

Aspey wrote that although the Coconino National Forest could legally require passes and collect fees for people using areas with improvements -- like restrooms, picnic tables, parking spots or trash collection -- the agency couldn't legally require someone to have a pass just to visit an unimproved trailhead, or to access wilderness.

DOING NOTHING NOT FEASIBLE

Because of the legal ruling, sticking with a no-change scenario probably isn't feasible under the law, said Provencio.

"We don't really think that doing nothing is an option," she said.

But dropping all fees also would have a big impact. Provencio said that requiring people to buy the pass leads to more visits to Forest Service offices, more education about staying on trails and hiking safely, more rangers visiting people in the field, and fewer search and rescue missions.

If there was no pass, some areas (including archaeological sites) would likely be run by a private company, office hours for visitor centers would likely be cut, and there might be an uptick in search and rescue cases and a reduction in law enforcement, she said.

BE HONEST ABOUT IMPACTS

Francisco Valenzuela oversees recreational issues for the national forests of the Southwest, and he will have some input into this decision.

He has a lot of conflicting views about fees on public lands, and he asks whether it's fair to spend a lot of money hauling trash and cleaning toilets for a forest surrounding a resort community, and not to spend that money building trails or doing work on more remote forests.

"I think we need to listen to the public," he said, which in his view would mean ending the Red Rock fee or continuing one like it if that's what the public wants.

Valenzuela has called for private companies to manage sledding areas, saying it's safer that way, and he might propose a fee to use Fossil Creek.

"If the community of Sedona does not want to pay those fees, we just have to be honest about what the impacts will be," he said.

He gave the example of a burned couch he saw at a trailhead.

A ranger called in to have it hauled off immediately.

With fewer employees, that couch might sit there awhile, he said.

He also asks whether it's fair to have taxpayers nationwide bear the costs for hikers in the West, when a majority don't use the forests.

"Americans tend to believe, 'If I use it, I should pay for it.'" Valenzuela said. "But in this case, people say, 'I want to use it but I'll let others pay for it.'"

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