

Payson (AZ) Roundup

Forest Service should seek balance on fees

May 31, 2011

A rock. And a hard place. Tonto National Forest officials have a spot right in between. The Tonto National Forest's decision to turn over a string of day-use areas to a private recreation management company has triggered a local furor, as residents find themselves asked to pay \$5 to park and gain access to the East Verde River or some trailhead parking just to take a hike in the woods.

Now, top forest officials say they're at least thinking about alternatives. They should think long and hard before they impose fees on using the forest, which is owned by the taxpaying public.

During a recent meeting, forest managers said they might offer a low-cost annual pass for the new day-use sites and trailheads, waive fees on the weekdays or seek a separate contract to manage those sites without charging fees.

Taxpayers should be able to use the forest on weekdays or weekends, charging one day and not the next penalizes those who work five days a week and look forward to getting out for a hike or fishing trip on the weekends.

We welcome the apparent flexibility and hope it proves more than lip service, but the forest officials need to examine the whole concept.

Certainly, the Forest Service faces real challenges in managing an array of recreation sites in Rim Country.

The Payson Ranger District has long relied on contracts with private firms to run a network of developed campsites. Those contracts make good sense, ensuring consistent management of some very popular campgrounds. We have no problem with people being required to pay a fee to use a well-developed campground.

The rub comes in the plan to add to those campground management permits the new paved parking and vault toilets along the East Verde, new paved parking areas on Tonto Creek and perhaps even mostly undeveloped parking areas at popular trailheads.

And what will be added next year?

Some of those contracts for only lightly developed day-use areas and trailheads would seem to skirt the edge of recent court cases that held the Forest Service can charge fees to maintain its facilities, but cannot charge a fee that effectively restricts access to public lands.

Forest Service officials maintain the \$5 parking fee for the paved lots and toilet facilities along the East Verde fully satisfy the legal requirements.

Perhaps — we do not agree — and Rim Country residents have reacted with indignation to the prospect of paying a fee to simply park and head upstream to fish, hike, swim and generally enjoy public lands.

On the other hand, those same residents also acknowledge the urgent need to control the use and abuse of those areas on the weekends. Litter, abandoned campfires and the lack of toilet facilities every weekend endanger all the communities along the East Verde.

There are other ways to control use. You can limit parking spaces and forbid overnight camping in those troublesome areas, thus limiting the number of people in a specific area. The Forest Service could send a ranger to overused areas on Saturday and Sunday and actually give out littering tickets.

Fortunately, the Forest Service seems sensitive to the need to strike a balance between controlling abuse and locking the public out of its forest.

So we welcome the improved facilities that will protect the creek. But we also hope the Forest Service will follow through on its recent search for alternatives to charging residents \$5 every time they want to enjoy the creek.