

Payson (AZ) Roundup

Tonto fee outcry may prompt change

By [Pete Aleshire](#)

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Coping with a public outcry, Tonto National Forest officials are casting about for an alternative to imposing day use fees on people who use parking areas along the East Verde River and on popular trailheads.

“There’s definitely some tweaks and adjustments we can make,” said Tom Klagunde, deputy forest supervisor for the 3-million-acre Tonto National Forest, which draws an estimated 6 million visitors annually, making it one of the most heavily visited forests in the country.

The Forest Service will consider a variety of alternatives to the proposed fees, including selling a low-cost annual pass, charging fees only on weekends or awarding a contractor a separate, no-fee contract to maintain the East Verde sites, said Klagunde.

That alternative plan could take effect this summer, he said.

Klagunde’s comment came during a meeting with Payson Mayor Kenny Evans and other officials, seeking to respond to widespread public complaints about the plan to let a private company operate day use sites along the East Verde and some trailheads and charge a fee — currently set at \$5 per visit.

Evans said several groups had complained about the fees, imposed after the Forest Service used federal grant money to pave four heavily used parking areas along the East Verde and build toilets, which must be regularly pumped and maintained.

“Every one of those groups say they know something needs to be done,” said Evans, “just not this.”

Moreover, the Western Slope Coalition has filed a protest of the plan to allow a private company to operate the sites and charge a fee. The Colorado-based group cited several court cases saying the Forest Service can charge to cover the cost of its facilities but can’t charge people just to gain access to the public forest.

Residents have urged the Forest Service to impose tighter restrictions on the use of the East Verde River for years. Residents have expressed serious concerns about contamination of a stream connected to the water table from which many subdivisions draw their drinking water.

In addition, the Water Wheel Fire two years ago started near a crowded, unregulated camping area and could have destroyed homes in both Beaver Valley and Whispering Pines but for a lucky shift in the wind.

The Tonto National Forest charges fees at 50 different sites. A single, \$90 Tonto Pass offers unlimited access to many of those sites — but not to those operated by private permit holders. As a result, the Tonto National Forest qualifies as the highest fee area in the country, according to the Western Slope Coalition.

Several private companies have submitted proposals to operate most of the major campgrounds in the Payson Ranger District, in addition to the four day-use sites on the East Verde River and three or four busy trailheads, which each have parking, portable toilets and trash cans.

Recreation Resource Management Service currently manages the campgrounds in the district and took over management of the East Verde sites this spring. The Forest Service also repaved and then imposed parking fees on several sites on Tonto Creek.

The company put up fee collection stations, charging \$5 per car to cover the cost of maintaining the site.

The company's contract expires this year and RRMS is one of the companies that has submitted a new proposal.

"We can be very flexible when it comes to these day use areas," said Kelly Moffitt, chief operating officer for RRMS, which operates facilities nationwide.

"If the district wants to change something, we'd be open to it," he said.

Klagunde said the district will release the first round of proposals in the next few weeks. Those proposals apparently all include plans to charge fees at the trailheads and day use areas, although Klagunde said he could not release details at this stage.

However, the protests have prompted the Tonto National Forest to make changes in the day use areas and trailheads.

Klagunde said that putting in the toilets and paved parking areas on the East Verde represents the first key steps in a "fairly long-term vision" for development and protection of that heavily used area.

"The first step is to get control of all the mayhem" created by heavy weekend use during the summer, said Klagunde.

The crowds of visitors — mostly from the Valley — fill up every available camping site and fish the heavily stocked creek. They also leave behind lots of trash and smoldering campfires.

The Western Slope Coalition has fought Forest Service fees nationwide. Congress authorized such fees to cover the cost of facilities for visitors.

However, two recent court cases in Arizona banned fees not related to the need to build and maintain facilities when those fees tend to charge for access to the public lands.

Klagunde said he believes the fees already being charged to park at the East Verde sites fit into the restrictions crafted by the court cases.

However, he said that the local outcry has prompted Tonto Forest officials to seek alternatives that will still allow easy access — especially for local residents long accustomed to fishing and hiking along the East Verde.

He noted that the Forest Service will in the next few weeks consider modifying its agreement with RRMS for the balance of this year and then take a second look at the competing proposals to run the sites and the campgrounds next year. Tonto Forest will award those long-term permits before the end of the year.