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Red Rock Pass due changes

CYNDY COLE Sun Staff Reporter | Posted: Thursday, June 2, 2011 5:08 am

The Coconino National Forest is weighing a couple of proposals to cut the number of areas where a pass is needed to park on the national forest surrounding Sedona.

Instead of charging \$5-per-day fees (\$20 annually) to hike or bike across 160,000 acres in the Red Rock Ranger District, the agency is now looking at charging those fees in select corridors totaling 12,000 acres or at specific trailheads.

The Forest Service wants to know what the public thinks of these plans. It says 65 percent of those who gave their opinions earlier supported a fee to maintain the area.

A final decision from Regional Forester Corbin Newman is expected in the fall.

The Forest Service offers several arguments against scaling a fee program to specific trailheads, stating the public may be encouraged to park in neighborhoods just outside of fee areas to avoid the fees.

No matter which idea ultimately wins, there is likely to be some difficulty in explaining the change, an agency spokeswoman said.

"We do think that we will be challenged with either proposal, just given that it will still be confusing to the public as to where the pass will be required or not required," said Connie Birkland, spokeswoman for the Red Rock Ranger District.

If the broader (12,000-acre) fee plan were chosen, the public would be charged to park along Oak Creek Canyon, some parts of State Route 179, and on Boynton Pass Road, along with at Honanki, Palatki, V Bar B, and Jim Thompson Trailhead.

That would still be fewer pay-to-park sites than in the past, when a Red Rock Pass was required to park at sites like Brins Mesa, Vultee Arch, Jacks Canyon, and some popular biking trailheads between Sedona and the Village of Oak Creek.

A second proposal would require passes only at 17 or 22 specific trailheads, possibly including Boynton Canyon, Encinosa, Midgley Bridge, Courthouse Butte and Bell Rock.

Estimated revenues from the pass that the Forest Service says are used to maintain trails, bathrooms and haul away trash could increase or decrease, depending on which option is chosen. Annual collections have averaged \$800,000, with estimates of the new plans ranging between \$962,000 and \$616,000.

BACKPACKER CHALLENGE

This all comes after a Sedona backpacker challenged the law following a ticket for parking at a remote trailhead. In September 2010, U.S. Magistrate Mark E. Aspey in Flagstaff agreed that the Coconino National Forest wasn't always following the law on where it could or couldn't charge fees.

Backpacker Jim Smith said Wednesday that he was pleased the Coconino National Forest was redoing its policies on pay-to-visit sites, but that it could be missing a major point.

"The law says that you cannot be charged a fee solely for parking," Smith said.

He refers to occasions when hikers park at a popular trailhead but don't use services like a picnic area, restroom or trash can.

Under either of the two new proposals, visitors who park at a pay-to-use site in the future but don't pay will face tickets, Birkland said.

"They're technically entering a fee site," she said.

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Give your opinion

Find the proposed Red Rock Pass changes, and maps, at www.redrockcountry.org and give your thoughts online, or call (928) 203-7500 to give your opinion.

The rules at this moment

Red Rock Pass NOT needed at:

- Verde Valley School Road
- Jacks Canyon Road
- Forest Road 152, also known as Dry Creek Road, which includes trailheads for Vultee Arch and Devil's Bridge
- Upper and Lower Red Rock Loop roads
- The unpaved portion of Boynton Pass Road west of Doe Trailhead
- The unpaved portion of Schnebly Hill Road, north of Huckaby Trailhead

Red Rock Pass STILL needed at:

- Palatki, Honanki, and V Bar V cultural sites
- All of Oak Creek Canyon
- Pullout sites along Highway 179 between the Village of Oak Creek and Sedona.
- Long Canyon, Boynton Canyon, Doe, Bear, and Aerie Trailheads along the paved Boynton Pass Road
- Huckaby, Soldiers Pass, Jordan, Thunder Mountain, Broken Arrow, Cathedral, and Airport Mesa trailheads near the Town of Sedona.

What U.S. Magistrate Mark E. Aspey ruled in September

"Congress expressed a manifest intent in (federal law) that a fee not be charged solely to park on the National Forest, or at a site where the six specific listed 'amenities' were not found."

The agency can legally charge fees where it provides all of these amenities: parking, toilets, trash cans, exhibits, picnic tables and security, Aspey ruled.

There is an exception in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act: No fee is required for persons who are driving through, walking through, boating through, riding through on horseback, or hiking through federal recreational lands and waters without using the (above) facilities and services.