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LOIS HENRY

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Tuesday, Jan 24 2012 06:29 PM

LOIS HENRY: If a fee is charged in the forest, is it fair?

By Lois Henry

I have an update for you on fees being charged to access popular areas in our national forests.

Well, it's not so much an actual update, more like another bit of government madness.

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Contacting the Forest Service

Let the forest supervisors who will decide whether to keep charging for access to public lands know what you think.

Los Padres National Forest Supervisor Peggy Hernandez

Direct: (805) 961-5733

General: (805) 968-6640

Sequoia National Forest Supervisor Kevin Elliott

(559) 784-1500, xt-1111

You can also meet Elliott in person at a luncheon to discuss forest issues Feb. 1 from 11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. in the Kernville Community Room (next to the Kernville Chamber of Commerce). Deadline to RSVP is Jan. 27. Cost is \$8.

Call Rick Larson at (760) 376-3781 or email to relarson@fs.fed.us or Chuck White (760) 379-0764 or email to chuck_white@mchsi.com.

As a safety precaution, I remind you that grinding your teeth hurts no one but you.

The Forest Service may be doing away with highly unpopular fees established in recent years in some of its forests, including the Sequoia and Los Padres national forests. Or maybe not. I wasn't able to get a straight answer.

Paperwork from the Director of Recreation and Heritage Resources' office seems pretty clear that most HIRA (high impact recreation area) fees will be going away.

But spokesmen for both the Sequoia and Los Padres national forests, which have HIRAs along Lake Isabella and Mount Pinos, just couldn't say.

The situation is "evolving," I was told.

Hmmm. Someone ought to tell the Director that.

The paperwork from that office gives the thumbs up to eliminating the HIRAs from Lake Isabella and changing the designation of the fee site at Mount Pinos. (That could mean the fee will stay but be called something else. Stay tuned.)

"I was told they were going to make substantial changes," said a frustrated Kitty Benzar, director of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition.

Changing the name of a fee wouldn't qualify as "substantial." Local forest supervisors will have the final say, Benzar noted.

This is key to anyone who wants unfettered access to their own public lands.

"The Forest Service claims that 95 percent of the land they manage is fee-free, but much of that cannot be reached except from places where fees are charged (such as HIRAs)," she said.

She wants to see fee areas tightened to only include developed areas, such as campgrounds.

Some of you may recall that I railed about this a few years ago when HIRAs were created around Lake Isabella. HIRAs in the Los Padres have been around for more than a decade.

The Forest Service has long charged some fees, mostly at campgrounds which have amenities such as bathrooms, trash service, picnic tables, etc. Visitors were charged \$5 per vehicle and the fee was usually charged only during high use seasons.

HIRAs are much larger areas, which typically do not have the above listed amenities, or at least not all in the same vicinity, and fees are charged year round.

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LA ESTACION, SPAIN -- On a crisp fall Saturday morning, Luis Valciento and Mercedes Martin enjoy the quiet of their farm about 20 miles northeast of Seville.

At Lake Isabella, Sequoia Forest administrators in 2009 suggested creating an HIRA all the way around the lake and up the Kern River to Lloyd Meadow and doubling the fee to \$10 per vehicle

Following an angry protest, they backed off and settled on three HIRAs at Auxiliary Dam, Old Isabella Road and South Fork.

They kept the fee at \$10, though.

The Los Padres the HIRA fee only costs \$5.

If you've driven to play in the snow at Mount Pinos, you were supposed to have purchased an Adventure Pass and had it on your dashboard.

I don't mean just for vehicles parking at the very top. As soon as you turn off Cuddy Valley Road and head up the hill, you're in a HIRA and better have that pass. Same with the Lake Isabella HIRAs.

Even if you don't use a porta potty, need a trash can or sit at a picnic table, just being in the area requires you to have a \$5 or \$10 pass.

I, and a number of others, feel HIRAs and how they've been implemented are illegal under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which is due to expire in 2014. That act has allowed more fees but it was very specific that it not be used to charge the public for passing through, simply parking or camping in undeveloped areas.

The intent was that the public should pay extra for extra services, Benzar said. If they weren't using any services they shouldn't be charged any fees.

"Up until now, the Forest Service has ignored those prohibitions," said Benzar. Her group's website, <http://www.westernslopenofee.org>, has numerous examples of people being ticketed for merely parking in a HIRA.

Bodfish resident Ron Benoit and others in the Kern River Valley who oppose the HIRAs told me they wouldn't mind so much if they saw a real increase in services. But so far, it seems the Forest Service's attempts at trash collection are as haphazard as their attempts at even collecting the HIRA fees.

"Sometimes the areas are staffed, sometimes not," he said. "Their excuse is a lack of staff. They're creating their own 'Catch 22.'

"It's kind of a joke."

But not a funny one to people without a lot of money who just want to spend the day fishing with their kids at the lake. Their lake, actually.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at <http://www.bakersfield.com>, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenry@bakersfield.com

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Bako 56 minutes ago

Wow that makes me mad too! Seeing those big ugly signs posted all over the forest asking for money, those should be removed!

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