

# Federal Parks & Recreation

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Volume 30 Number 2, January 27, 2012

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## **FS takes steps to drop rec fees for high impact areas**

The Forest Service last month issued new recommendations to the field that, if followed, would essentially eliminate fees for high impact recreation areas (HIRAs).

Fees for HIRAs have for years irritated a number of recreation visitors. The critics object to paying fees to enter broad areas - i.e. the HIRAs - that include a number of developed recreation sites. But they don't object as much to paying fees for developed sites, such as campgrounds.

The critics, led by the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, argue that Congress in the first instance did not authorize the service to charge area-wide fees.

Instead of HIRAs, the service is indicating it will substitute standard amenity fees and expanded amenity fees. But the agency will no longer charge for such things as parking near recreation areas.

"I hope what this means is they will get rid of fees at trailheads," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. "That's the way it's coming down from Washington. How the field offices implement it remains to be seen." The coalition is the lead organization that objects to rec fees.

The Forest Service changed its policy in a series of recommendations to regional offices. The change comes after five years of criticism of HIRAs from recreationists and Congressmen from both political parties.

The service's recommendations are

quite specific. They advise regions as to which specific areas should be converted from HIRAs to standard amenity fees. For instance, in response to an advisory from the Washington, D.C., office, Region 2 of the Forest Service (Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Nebraska) has proposed removing the HIRA status for four areas, all in Colorado.

The Washington office agreed with three but said more work was needed on an Arapaho Roosevelt National Recreation Area. In a December 16 letter to the acting regional forester, Acting Deputy Chief of the National Forest System James M. Pena said, "The Washington Office recognizes that its support of the three proposals does not mean they will be implemented as proposed. The next step in the Area Review process is public involvement, culminating with a presentation to the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee for a recommendation."

Benzar said she suspects the Forest Service made the change to eliminate HIRAs because the agency knows that the underlying rec law, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) of 2004, expires on Dec. 8, 2014. And Congress may change the law. "I think the Forest Service knows Congress is not going to allow them to retain HIRAs," she said.

Benzar had been in negotiations with some representatives of the recreation industry on legislative revisions to FLREA in this Congress, but those talks have broken down.

Nevertheless, the recreation industry in an annual meeting January 8-11 in Williamsburg, Va., invited Benzar to their Partners Outdoors 2012 confab. At the meeting she criticized both the Forest Service and private concessioners for ignoring the public.

"As the importance of corporate and fee-based funding has increased, the role of the public in setting recreation policy has eroded," she told the gathering.

The fiscal 2011 administration budget projected that FLREA would

produce \$264.5 million, with 80 percent retained by the agencies. The lion's share, \$173 million, was to be collected by the Park Service, followed by the Forest Service with \$67.5 million, the Bureau of Land Management with \$18.7 million, the Fish and Wildlife Service with \$4.8 million and the Bureau of Reclamation with just under \$500,000.

In the last Congress four western senators - two from each party - introduced legislation (S 868) that would repeal FLREA. The four are Montana Sens. Max Baucus (D) and Jon Tester (D) and Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo (R) and James E. Risch (R).

Repeal would not affect entrance fees to developed sites federal land managers charge under the Land and Water Conservation Act. It would, however, make these changes:

- \* eliminate collection of "standard amenity fees" at developed sites that the 2004 law authorized for the Forest Service, BLM, and the Bureau of Reclamation,

- \* eliminate retention of recreation fees by the agencies and return use fees to the U.S. Treasury,

- \* cap entrance fees charged by NPS at \$25 for a single visit by car, \$12 by foot or bicycle, and \$40 for an annual pass (instead of \$15), although NPS would still retain old entrance fee authority,

- \* eliminate a multi-agency American Passport and reinstate the old Golden Eagle and Golden Age Passports charged by the Park Service, and

- \* increase the Golden Eagle passport fee from \$25 to \$65.

## **California closing parks, but feds may be adding lands**

Just as the Department of Interior is pondering the addition of two major conservation areas in California, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) is gearing up to close 70 state parks. And to slash ranger levels in the state park system to the bone.

The enacted fiscal year 2011-12 California state budget mandates the