

Verde Independent

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Critics remain unsatisfied

New Red Rock Pass program takes effect

Steve Ayers

Staff Reporter

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SEDONA - After nearly a year spent mulling over a judge's decision and gathering input from the public, the Coconino National Forest will implement a leaner and lighter Red Rock Pass program effective today.

The program, which has been around since 1996, charges visitors to the many sites in the Red Rock area of Sedona a parking fee.

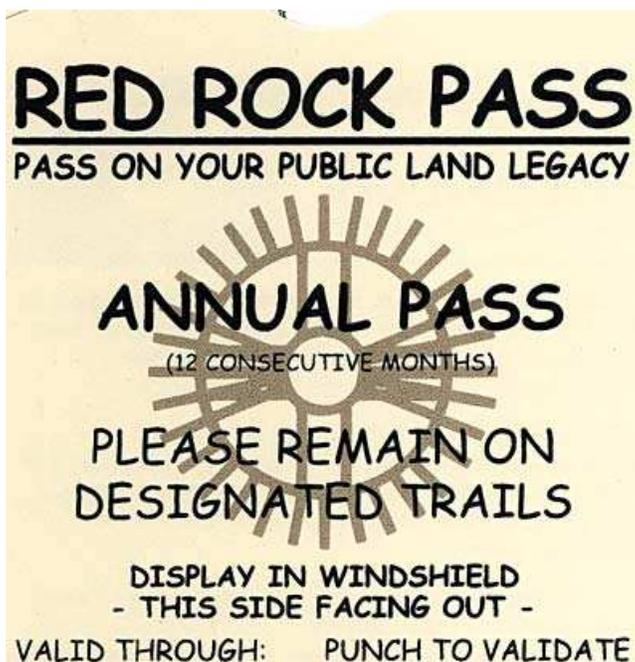
Changes were forced on the program in 2010 when a federal judge ruled that the fee was being applied in a broader manner than the Federal Lands Enhancement Act allows.

Under the new program, fees will remain the same, but the area in which visitors must display a Red Rock Pass has been reduced by 93 percent, from 160,000 acres to 11,000 acres.

The new area includes one corridor along State Routed 89A from Midgley Bridge, up Oak Creek Canyon to Bootlegger day use area, and a second one on State Route 179 from Bell Rock Vista and Pathway, north to just past Back O' Beyond.

A pass will also be required at seven individual sites including Honanki, Palatki, V Bar V Heritage Site, Doe/Bear Mountain, Boyton Canyon, Baldwin and Jim Thompson Trailheads.

Daily, weekly and annual passes remain at \$5, \$15 and \$20 respectively.



Review calls for restricted Forest Service fees

"I don't think the first time visitor will recognize a difference. The change will be most recognizable to the locals, especially where a pass is required and where one is not.

"Overall we are hoping it isn't confusing, and that we can make the change as simple as possible and that the general public will not feel an impact," said Coconino National Forest spokesperson Connie Birkland.

The organization that helped write the legal brief that the judge used to overturn the prior program is still not convinced that the new fee program is appropriate, or legal.

"We are working to change the law so there won't be any fees for simple things like day use," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western No Fee Coalition, "In the meantime we have a law in place that we feel should be followed.

"It's good the fee area has been reduced, but it's still not legal. The judge's decision specifically prevents the Forest Service from charging anyone a fee if all they are doing is parking their car and accessing a trailhead.

"I predict that if they are going to start writing tickets to people who park and go for a hike, someday someone is going to say 'you can't do that' and they will end up back in court."

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By Steve Ayers

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VILLAGE OF OAK CREEK - Sedona resident Jim Smith had no idea of the firestorm he would set off the day he parked his car off Dry Creek Road outside of Sedona and walked off into the red rocks for a weekend camping trip.

But when he decided to fight a ticket he discovered upon his return, for not displaying a Red Rock Pass on his vehicle, he set in motion a series of events for which the smoke has yet to clear.

Currently the Forest Service has 10 areas in Arizona, which like the Red Rock pass area have been designated as "High Impact Recreation Areas (HIRA)." They all charge fees, either for day use and/or overnight use.

Smith successfully challenged the way the fee was being charged in the Red Rocks. And in the process he forced the Forest Service to review the other nine areas to see if the fees in those areas were being correctly applied.

That review has been completed, and according to a letter from James Pena, acting deputy chief of the National Forest system, at least eight of those nine are set to disappear altogether or, like the Red Rock Pass fee area, be greatly reduced in size.

According to Pena's letter, the Washington office concurs with recommendations made during the review that would remove the HIRA designation at such places along the [Verde River](#) as Bartlett Lake, Horseshoe Lake, Needle Rock and Seven Springs.

The recommendation is to apply the fees only to those sites with amenities that qualify under the law as a fee area. Access to areas outside of specifically designated sites would be free.

Just because the Washington office agrees with the recommendations doesn't mean they will be implemented. Under the procedures established by the Forest Service, it will be up to local managers to make the final designation.

Critics have contended that the Forest Service has continued to operate under the Fee Demo program, which was in place from 1996 to 2004 but replaced with the more restrictive language in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA).

"The Forest Service claims that 95 percent of the land they manage is fee-free," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western No Fee Coalition, "but much of that cannot be reached except from places where parking fees are charged. We are not going to be satisfied until we see real changes on the ground."

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