

Payson Roundup

Public lands, private fees says Tonto Forest officials

February 21, 2012

To quote the immortal Woody Guthrie: "This land is your land. This land is my land." Right on, Woody — oh, yeah, and the federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Last week, a three-judge panel ruled the U.S. Forest Service can't charge fees for access to public lands. The ruling will hopefully stem the proliferation of fees slapped onto places like trailheads, trout streams and undeveloped campgrounds. (See the story on page 10A.)

The court's ruling does allow the Forest Service to continue charging for the use of certain facilities that require ongoing maintenance, like fully developed campgrounds, boat launching ramps, lodges and other facilities on public lands.

But the court rightly concluded that: "everyone is entitled to enter the national forests without paying a cent."

Yes indeed: Here come de judge. Right on, your honor.

Just one little catch ... (you knew there would be a catch, after all, it is the Forest Service).

The ruling applies to fees charged by the Forest Service for access to public lands — but it apparently doesn't apply to private contractors hired by the Forest Service to charge for access to public lands.

Come again?

See, in the Payson Ranger District a private contractor actually operates almost all the campgrounds and day-use spots, like parking spots for hiking and fishing spots. The contractor also picks up trash and pumps pit toilets at the region's most popular trailheads.

This entitles the contractor to also collect campground fees or parking fees all over Rim Country.

Now, that makes sense when it comes to operating developed campgrounds. The contractor has provided clean, well-run, economical campgrounds for years through this arrangement.

However, the Tonto National Forest recently stretched the concept too far by including in the contract the right to collect fees at trailheads and day-use areas where most people park their cars to head off on a hike or fishing expedition.

If the Forest Service operated those sites, the federal court ruling last week would ban the collection of fees.

So why does it alter the constitutionality of the fee if some private vendor collects the money?

And just whose land is it anyway?

Designer drugs pose challenge

The proliferation of legal designer drugs makes a frightening moving target for Rim Country community leaders.

Fortunately, alert community groups and a creative Payson Town Council seem resolved to protect our children — and this community.

Adults are just waking up to the potential threat posed by the latest artificial high, which has been selling briskly and profitably in various local outlets for months.

Labeled “not for human consumption” and packed as “spice” or “potpourri,” these mixtures include a wild blend of elements — including an artificial version of the active ingredient in marijuana.

No one knows whether these improvised blends pose a health risk. Anecdotal reports have linked some of these mixtures to seizures, hallucinations and bizarre behavior. Given the complete lack of human testing, sale of such mixtures seems cynical and irresponsible.

But how can we stop it?

Already, many people who take their citizenship seriously have rallied to picket the handful of local outlets that carry the products. Several outlets have responded by pulling the product off their shelves — although the designer drugs have proven popular sellers for many struggling businesses.

Fortunately, people doing business in Rim Country know that this community has not only a heart but a conscience. You cannot do well here by putting our children at risk.

The state Legislature last week whipped through a bill to outlaw several formulations of this latest drug craze.

Meanwhile, the Payson Town Council has also taken up the challenge.

The council last week brainstormed how the town could write an ordinance that would keep up with the rapid substitution of components through which the drug designers have so far frustrated the regulators.

Payson is exploring an approach that would focus on the “intent” of the seller when someone comes to the counter to buy a little package of drugs marked “not for human consumption.” If the seller knows the buyer will in fact consume the contents, then he’ll be violating a town ordinance.

The approach sounds creative and potentially effective — especially with the backing of the community.

So we hope the peddlers will take note.

Play roulette with someone else’s kids.

It’s not going to work in a community that cares.

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