

Ironton (Ohio) Tribune:

Commission pushes for end to forest fees

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The county commission has taken the fight to eliminate fees at the Wayne National Forest to the federal level.

At its Thursday meeting the commissioners approved sending a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture requesting that the forest service stop charging horsemen who travel through the Ironton district a \$45 fee for the season from April to December.

“This county and our public school districts already lose significant property tax revenue due to the presence of the forest and now we are denied the potential economic benefits that might be derived from the forest as well,” according to the letter drafted by Commission President Les Boggs.

The issue concerning the fees has been a long-fought battle of a group of local horsemen including Rick McCleese, Jill Romanello and Mike Shannon. The three are founders of the Elkins Creek Horse Camp.

“We feel this fee has been illegally charged to us,” Romanello said at the meeting. “We feel these fees are holding back tourism.”

Fees can only be charged where there are specified amenities offered, according to the letter. Those include a permanent trash receptacle, a permanent toilet facility, a kiosk, picnic tables and security services.

“These requirements are not satisfied by the Wayne National Forest, yet the fee is being charged anyway, again in an apparent disregard of federal law,” the letter states.

In 2007 the forest charged a \$25 fee bringing in \$22,000, Boggs said. The next year the fees went up to the current \$45 level with the total amount collected cut by almost 50 percent.

“However well the money is being spent, federal law directs that it should not be collected in the first place and the practice should be discontinued immediately,” the letter states. “The forest exists for the benefit of the American people, not the other way around.”