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## **Colorado: Forest Service to drop fees at Cataract Lake**

Posted on June 20, 2012 by Bob Berwyn



*Day-use at Green Mountain Reservoir will once again be free after years of wrangling over a federal lands recreation fee program.*

***Revised plan for Green Mountain Reservoir, Cataract Lake area gets provisional OK from advisory group***

**By Bob Berwyn**

SUMMIT COUNTY — This land is once again your land for free, at least at the popular Cataract Lake trailhead in northern Summit County, where the U.S. Forest Service has been charging a fee to park and hike since the late 1990s.

But last week, a citizen advisory committee voted to approve a revised recreation plan for the larger Green Mountain Reservoir area, including Cataract Lake, and the new plan ends the unpopular Cataract Lake parking and hiking fee, as well as day use fees at [Green Mountain Reservoir](#). The new plan also reconfigures camping fees to a basic per-site charge, with extra fees for extra cars.

A couple of caveats: The vote by the [Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee](#) apparently was incomplete, with a few members missing, so it's not altogether clear if the vote will stick, Arapahoe-Roosevelt National Forest Supervisor Rick Cooksey, the designated federal official on the recreation advisory panel. Cooksey said he will speak with the members who were absent from the meeting to try and get their approval for the Green Mountain-area plan.

If the vote does stick, it probably won't take effect until next summer, according to Ken Waugh, recreation staff officer at the U.S. Forest Service Dillon Ranger District.

"I consider Green Mountain a victory not just for us but for the Forest Service. It's in compliance with the law," said Kitty Bazar, president of the [Western Slope No-Fee Coalition](#), a group that's been spearheading the charge against inappropriate and illegal public land fees.

The history of the controversial fees goes back to the late 1990s when the Forest Service launched what was then called the recreation fee demonstration project, or rec fee demo, for short. Cataract Lake was one of the original sites chosen to try and wear down public resistance to the idea of paying fees to park and hike.

The agency adopted the fees with the justification that recreation budgets were shrinking, although opposition groups claimed it wasn't quite that simple. Critics said the fees were part of a subtle shift toward the privatization and capitalization of public lands.

The bulk of the revenues from the fee program were intended to be used at the sites where they are collected to make needed improvements, with a smaller percentage going to administrative costs (fee collection, enforcement) and to a regional fund for starting new fee projects.

At Green Mountain Reservoir, the recreation fees have helped to cover costs of managing the area in the last few years, but needed improvements at the campgrounds have been supplemented from the overall Forest Service budget, with the biggest recent boost coming from a federal economic recovery grant that paid for major improvements on Highway 9 and the Cow Creek camping area.

As opposition grew, and when the demo program expired, Congress passed an updated version of the fee program, called the [Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act](#). The revised law included very specific requirements as to where public land agencies can charge fees, but the underlying philosophy was the same.

Since then, the controversy over the fee program has focused on whether certain fee sites have the amenities required by the law. Critics continue to charge that the agencies are charging fees that don't meet the legal requirements, and they have won several significant court victories, most recently in Arizona, where a federal judge nixed an area-wide recreation fee.

As a result of those rulings, the Forest Service has even entered into settlement talks on the recreation fees it charges at Mt. Evans, where the fee structure may be revised as a result of the talks.