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Bend man part of group suing USFS over concessionaires' fees

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By Dylan J. Darling
/ The Bulletin

A Bend man is part of a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service, saying the agency is allowing private companies to charge excessive fees at recreation sites.

The complaint — filed this week in district court in Washington, D.C. — uses Walton Lake on the Ochoco National Forest as an example along with sites on other forests elsewhere in Oregon, Arizona and Colorado.

“It's not just Walton Lake, it's a national issue,” said Scott Silver, executive director of Wild Wilderness in Bend.

Silver said he went to Walton Lake last month to hike the mile loop around the lake and have a picnic. While he thought his \$30 annual Northwest Forest Pass from the Forest Service would cover parking fees, he said he was charged \$5 by Aud & Di Campground Services Inc. The Utah-based company manages the campground and other amenities at the lake as a concessionaire with the Forest Service.

The \$5 was in effect an “entrance fee,” said Silver, one of five individuals named in the lawsuit. Such a fee goes against Forest Service policy, the complaint contends.

Forest Service officials declined to discuss the lawsuit.

“At this time we are reviewing the case and we are not commenting at this time,” said Tory Kurtz, spokeswoman for the Ochoco National Forest.

The Northwest Forest Pass is only accepted at sites operated by the Forest Service, said Steve Hunn, co-owner of Aud & Di Campground Services. He said the family-run company is following Forest Service policy and correct in charging for what it provides at Walton Lake.

“Sounds like ... they need to settle this at the national level,” he said.

The Western Slope No Fee Coalition — a Durango, Colo., group opposed to fees for visiting public land — is involved in the complaint.

It has been raising concerns about the Forest Service allowing concessionaires to charge extra fees for years, said Kitty Benzar, president of the group.

“They seem to be more concerned with the profitability of the concessionaires than with providing

access to affordable recreation for the American public," Benzar said in a press release.

The other examples from Oregon cited in the complaint are Bagby Hot Springs and Big Eddy day-use sites, both on the Mt. Hood National Forest, said Olivia Schmidt, program director for Bark. The Portland-based nonprofit is focused on how the forest is managed.

"What we have are people being charged to walk through areas with amenities," she said.

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