

## Hearing Could Hinder Free Access to Federal Public Lands in Idaho



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TWIN FALLS, Idaho • Free access to Idaho's undeveloped public lands could end if a federal law isn't reauthorized or replaced within the next year.

Under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management are only allowed to charge recreation fees for improved sites

with amenities such as campgrounds or rental cabins. The law, however, was given a 10-year limit and will sunset in 2014 unless Congress reauthorizes or replaces it.

The recreation fees will be analyzed during the hearing today by a public lands subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation.

"We're trying to get it replaced, but a new bill would have to have 10 times the safeguards," said Scott Phillips, a public lands advocate and former Forest Service employee.

The heart of the issue is to protect access to public lands without having to pay or be intimidated by heavy fines, Phillips said.

"General recreational access for the American people for our undeveloped back lands is our birthright," he said.

Under the law, agencies cannot charge for access to trailheads or parking areas. While some states, such as Arizona and California, have been embroiled in court battles over recreation fees since FLREA passed, Idaho was an advocate for removing the fees as soon as possible, said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition.

That's because Idaho residents were outraged by the fees, she said.

As one of the witnesses who will speak at today's hearing, Benzar plans to use Idaho as an example of successfully removing burdensome fees.

While the law doesn't expire until 2014, the public will be affected as early as December, she said. By then, National Park passes will go on sale for 2014. But if FLREA isn't replaced, the passes won't be guaranteed for the entire year.

"Nobody wants to hurt the national parks, but no one is going to buy an \$80 pass that isn't good for the entire year," Benzar said.

When the law was first passed, the Sawtooth National Forest removed fees from 21 recreation sites, said Ann Niesen, recreation and lands staff officer with the Forest Service.

"Losing that income generation has not hurt the Wood River Valley," she said. "Overall, we have continued to have really high-quality trailheads and trail systems."

At the same time, the agency revisited how much it was charging at its developed sites to make sure fees were comparable to those in the Boise and Payette National Forests, Niesen said.

Under the law, agencies must undergo a thorough public comment period before they can change recreation fees, Niesen said.

"It's really increased transparency on how we set fees," she said.

The exception are sites managed by concessionaires. Private companies overseeing federal recreation areas do not fall under FLREA and therefore can charge fees without public input, Niesen said.

Benzar said she wants to see a new bill that would eliminate the concessionaires' exemption.

"To me, that's a huge issue," Benzar said. "In many cases, they're allowed to establish their own private pass, even though that's a federally built or federally owned facility."

## **Watch the Hearing**

A U.S. House subcommittee will hold an oversight hearing on recreation fees on public lands at 8 a.m. MST today. Watch the hearing at <http://naturalresources.house.gov/live/>.