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## **PUBLIC LANDS: Lawmakers consider overhaul of law authorizing recreation fees (Wednesday, June 19, 2013)**

**Jessica Estepa, E&E reporter**

While a federal recreation fee program must be reauthorized before it expires next year, that doesn't mean the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act won't get a makeover, members of a House Natural Resources subcommittee acknowledged yesterday.

Lawmakers have until December 2014 -- 18 months from now -- to reform the law that allows the Interior Department and the Forest Service to charge user fees for properties with restrooms, picnic tables or other facilities.

"In one way or another, it has to be reauthorized," said Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah), chairman of the Public Lands and Environmental Regulation Subcommittee.

Obama administration officials emphasized the law's importance. Leslie Weldon, deputy chief of the National Forest System, explained that the fees -- which in fiscal 2011 brought in \$260.6 million to the Forest Service and four Interior agencies -- helped improved recreation facilities and maintenance.

Pamela Haze, Interior's deputy assistant secretary for budget, finance performance and acquisition, warned that the program's expiration would strip the agencies of their authority to charge fees. The act repealed previous provisions for fees.

"We are concerned that a potential lapse in this authority will detrimentally impact the agencies' ability to support projects that improve visitor safety, experiences and opportunities," Haze said.

"Furthermore, the agencies will be faced with challenging decisions as we try to anticipate the future of the program and make decisions about ongoing operations such as the issuance of an annual pass."

But FLREA also has critics. The most vocal is Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition.

Benzar has previously testified before Congress to criticize fees charged by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

Now, with reauthorization around the corner, Benzar suggested yesterday adding provisions that are not open to interpretation, limiting entrance fees to national parks and wildlife refuges, and making sure financial accountability is established.

"The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act has failed to rein in Forest Service and BLM overreach, thwarting congressional intent," she said. "It is time for Congress to take a hard look and a new approach."

Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, supported reauthorizing the law, but he suggested that Congress strip agencies' authority to charge recreation fees on Forest Service, BLM and Bureau of Reclamation Lands.

Those agencies in turn would receive recreation appropriations that would be equal to the revenue brought in from the fees -- which, at \$82.9 million, was less than a third of the total fee revenue from FLREA for the agencies in fiscal 2011.

"Our public lands are not bookstores," he said. "They are more like libraries."