

Forest Service, after suit, to drop fees at many recreation sites in Catalinas



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People who visit the Catalina Mountains north of Tucson can soon say goodbye to day-use fees at many national forest recreation sites in the range.

"More than 99 percent of the original fee area will no longer be subject to recreation fees" beginning July 4, said Heidi Schewel, spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service.

Fees - \$5 daily or \$20 for an annual pass - will be charged for only 11 of 28 developed recreation sites previously subject to fees, Schewel said. All other trailheads and undeveloped sites that once required fees will no longer have them.

The change stems from a U.S. District Court settlement in January between the Forest Service and Tucsonans who filed suit against the agency over collection of fees.

Plaintiffs were to receive \$100,000 to cover attorneys' fees and expenses, according to terms of the agreement.

One of the plaintiffs, Gaye Adams, said Thursday that the plan set out by the Forest Service appears to comply with a compromise worked out in the agreement.

"However, there are 96 high-impact recreation areas across the country similar to the Catalinas where fees are still being charged, including Sabino and Madera canyons" near Tucson, Adams said. "We'd like to know if the Forest Service plans to bring them into compliance with the law."

FEES PAST AND PRESENT

The original fee system in the Catalinas, in effect since 1996, allowed the Forest Service to charge fees to people who parked and hiked on trails or used recreation-site facilities.

This included collecting fees from all drivers who parked their vehicles along the 28-mile Catalina Highway.

Ensuing legal challenges by Adams and others resulted in limitations on fees that could be charged to people who merely parked and set off on a hike.

The January settlement agreement brought further limits - allowing for fees to be charged only at the 11 developed recreation sites on Mount Lemmon. They include sites with picnic areas, trailheads and a visitor center. (See box for the 11 sites.)

Visitors will have free access to sites "that are not on the list of 11," Schewel said.

Two sites in the Catalinas are in a somewhat different situation.

"Rose and Spencer Canyon campgrounds are managed by concessionaires, who will charge visitors concession fees for their services," Schewel said. "They are not connected to Forest Service standard amenity fees."

SIGNS TO BE POSTED

Shalonda Guy, Forest Service deputy district ranger for the Catalina Mountains district, said fee requirements should be clear to mountain visitors.

"All sites where recreation fees will be charged will be clearly signed," Guy said in a news release. "Those who recreate at sites without clearly posted information will no longer be required to pay a fee."

REVENUE FROM FEES

About \$275,000 in fees was collected annually in the Catalinas under the former fee program, Schewel said.

She didn't provide an estimate as to how much would be collected annually under the new fee policy.

Sites with fees

The U.S. Forest Service will collect fees at 11 developed recreation sites in the Catalina Mountains. The fees will be in effect at 10 of the sites as of July 4. Fees won't be collected for the Mount Lemmon Recreation Site at the top of Mount Lemmon until a new trailhead parking site is completed. It's scheduled for this fall. The 11 sites are:

- Molino Basin
- Cypress
- Middle Bear
- Chihuahua Pine
- Palisades Visitor Center
- Box Elder
- Inspiration Rock
- Alder
- Loma Linda

- Marshall Gulch
- Mount Lemmon

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