

Forest Service scales back Adventure Pass

By Steve Scauzillo, San Gabriel Valley Tribune
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Facing increasing legal pressures, the U.S. Forest Service plans to eliminate the \$5-a-day Adventure Pass fee from 160,000 acres in the Angeles National Forest, including popular day-use areas in San Gabriel Canyon and Mount Baldy.

The Forest Service's proposed shrinking fee program will allow millions of Southern Californians to enter the forest without paying the \$5 day pass or carry the \$30 yearly pass.

So far, the agency has proposed turning several areas requiring visitors to pay fees into free-of-charge zones. These include: Angeles Crest, Big Pines-Big Rock, Big Tujunga, Elizabeth Lake, Frenchman's Flat, Front Country, Little Rock, Mount Baldy, Rowher/Drinkwater and San Gabriel Canyon, according to the Forest Service. The list of "free sites" include the popular Devore Trail Camp and Hoegees Trail Camp. However, the West Fork Trailhead would still require an Adventure Pass.

While the news may be welcomed by hikers and off-road vehicle enthusiasts, the proposal will decrease revenues enjoyed by the Forest Service under the 16-year-old Adventure Pass program. Pass dollars are used for maintenance and recreation, such as repairing toilets, removing graffiti and planting trees.

"We do anticipate a reduction in revenue but it is unknown what the financial impacts will be," said John Heil, a spokesman for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region.

Under the Recreation Enhancement Act, several forests in the state collect fees from visitors.

The Forest Service collected \$1.2 million in fees in the Angeles forest in 2011. Of that total, \$795,179 was spent on maintenance and repairs, \$204,562 on visitor services and \$43,066 on collecting the fees, according to the 2011 Forest Service Recreation Program Fee Accomplishment Report.

In the San Bernardino forest, \$1.38 million was collected in revenues and \$364,000 was spent on maintenance and repairs; \$282,295 on visitor services and \$373,446 on cost of collections, which included collections on the Angeles, Cleveland and Los Padres forests as well, according to the 2011 report.

"The REA funds will not be spent in the free areas but we do have other options for maintaining those areas such as partnerships and other appropriated funds," Heil said.

Four hikers won an appellate court ruling in February 2012 that limited the Adventure Pass

to areas with specific amenities. All other areas, including parking lots and trail heads, were ordered to be free of charge by Judge Robert Gettleman.

But because the case originated in the Coronado National Forest in Arizona, the Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service did not institute changes, said plaintiff attorney Matt Kenna of the Public Interest Environmental Law firm in Durango, Colo.

“Any court of appeal ruling applies to all Western states,” Kenna said Friday. “They (Forest Service) should have adjusted their fee programs but they didn’t.”

Instead, hikers Richard Fragosa and Alasdair Cyone of Ojai, along with Peter Wiechers of Kernville and John Karevoll of Running Springs, sued Randy Moore, regional forester of the Southwestern Region, in federal court, with the hopes of getting the Forest Service to apply the appellate court ruling nationwide, Kenna said.

The case is scheduled to be heard by Judge Terry J. Hatter in federal court in Los Angeles on March 10. Kenna said the Forest Service has released a plan to scale back the Adventure Pass in court briefs. The plan is similar to the one it announced Thursday.

But Heil denied the plan was a result of the Arizona case. “No. Those are two separate things. We’ve been working on this since 2011. It is not related to the court case of 2012,” he said.

Kenna said the Forest Service has a policy of never admitting any action is a result of losing a court case.

He argues in his lawsuit that the Adventure Pass “erects barriers to low-income citizens” and “represent double taxation” on lands already paid for through taxes. Kenna and Fragosa want to see the Adventure Pass eliminated, not scaled back.

“They’ve indicated there would be some reductions but they are only making it somewhat smaller. They will still charge people who park in a trail head who don’t use amenities,” Kenna said.

The public can send comments on the proposal to Tamara Wilton by email to twilton@fs.fed.us or by U.S. mail to: Pacific Southwest Region, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94592. The Forest Service will hold a public meeting before the 11-member Recreation Resource Advisory Committee (RRAC) on Jan. 15 and Jan. 16. The location has not yet been determined, Heil said.