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What Should the Price of Visiting Wilderness Be?

If passed, HR 5204 could introduce widespread fees for entering formerly free public lands

By Rachel Nuwer
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Last month, House Resources Committee chairman Doc Hastings quietly introduced a new act to the House that—if passed—could make fees for using wilderness areas and other public lands much more common, Adventure Journal reports. On paper, HR 5204 would act to "improve recreation opportunities and increase consistency and accountability in the collection and expenditure of recreation fees collected on public lands and forests." What that means in reality, Adventure Journal explains, is that any public area that contains a toilet within half a mile could require an admission fee.

HR 5204 builds on the Rec Fee Demo, which was introduced in the 1990s and allowed managers to charge fees for entry into

some parks, as well as for amenities like parking or camping. The new amendments, however, would extend to "any federal recreational lands and water." Adventure Journal elaborates on what a few of those specific changes could entail:

- It would remove the ban on Forest Service and BLM charging for parking, picnicking along roads or trailsides, general access, dispersed areas with low or no investment, driving through, walking through, boating through, horseback riding through, or hiking through federal recreational lands and waters without using facilities and services, camping at undeveloped sites that do not provide minimum facilities, and use of overlooks or scenic pullouts...
- The Forest Service and BLM would be allowed to charge day fees for entry to national conservation areas, national volcanic monuments, visitor centers, and anywhere that has a toilet within a half mile.
- Interagency passes, currently \$80, would automatically go up in price every three years.

At the same time, the Forest Service recently proposed a \$1,500 fee for any professional who takes pictures in U.S. Forest Service wilderness areas. As Adventure Journal points out, this could extend from photographers who sell a few prints online to bloggers. Those who were reporting pro-wilderness stories, however, would get a free pass. As Oregon's Sen. Ron Wyden told Adventure Journal, however, "Especially where reporters and bloggers are concerned, this policy raises troubling questions about inappropriate government limits on activity clearly protected by the First Amendment."

The Forest Service so far has not backed down, however, and the proposed HR 5204 amendments has the potential to "become law without any public hearing at all as a rider to a budget bill," Adventure Journal writes. So while the outcome of either of these changes is not yet clear, now might be a good time to schedule some wilderness vacations—and be sure to pack your camera, too.

About Rachel Nuwer



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