

Murkowski questions fees at glacier

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Sen. Lisa Murkowski has interjected herself into plans by the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center to impose fees on summer visitors hiking the Photo Point Trail and Steep Creek Trail.

The fees, which will be introduced in May, are part of a larger plan to raise revenue for the visitor center, which has seen its budget reduced even as the number of visitors surges.

In a hearing of the U.S. Senate committee on energy and natural resources, the senior senator from Alaska said she doesn't think fees should be charged for trail use.

"We don't mind paying these fees as long as they go toward improving the visitor experience. But we shouldn't be charging people for simply walking onto public land," Murkowski said.

She asked how the Forest Service would even collect fees from hikers who don't go into the visitor center.

As of May 1, the current \$3 fee for adults entering the visitor center will rise to \$5. Those 16 and under will still gain free entry. Season passes, which allow access for the pass holder and one guest to enter the visitor center, will rise from \$10 to \$15.

Fees also will be collected for use of bus shelters, the Steep Creek Trail and platforms, the viewing pavilion near the parking area, Photo Point Trail and all restroom facilities, according to Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center Director John Neary.

In previous statements to the Empire, Neary said most fee-taking will be performed through existing arrangements with tour and bus companies.

Murkowski's comments came as the energy and resources committee, of which Murkowski is chairwoman, considers reauthorization of the Federal Land Recreation Enhancement Act, which authorizes several federal agencies (including the Forest Service) to charge and collect fees on federal recreation lands and waters.

"While I wish we did not need to charge recreation fees, I am generally supportive of FLREA," Murkowski said.

She added that she expects FLREA, which expires at the end of 2016, to be extended for a year to allow Congress to complete a wider package of reforms on federal fee-taking.

Comments (4)

"Public". I happen to have an Alaska drivers license.

I am not just the "public" I am a resident and I've been visiting the glacier since the road leading to it was gravel, state-renowned pies were being served at its restaurant, Dad and I would back up with the pickup for blue ice and 'registering' amounted to a guestbook signature at a sheltered kiosk. Stopping me on my favorite trail to verify my right to be there will not do.

At the Forest Service office on the back loop road, they sell a "Lifetime Pass for U.S. Citizen or permanent resident, 62 years or older" for a \$10 one-time fee. They've accepted mine at the glacier for years; you'll also need valid photo ID.

Remember that rules and fees change, e.g. Golden Age Passports while still honored are no longer sold.

Considering the amount of tourists that impact these trails and the high costs of maintaining the trails, I support the fees 100%. Good grief. I remember the pie days too but those days are over. Today, the center has to be able to find funds from somewhere considering how Lisa and the Republicans have cut the Forest Service budget by millions.

Shows the undue influence tour and bus companies have in local communities . The tour companies would rather pocket the money than see it put into maintenance.

Ridiculous! What happens when the scammers start chasing people down to collect fees on the trails? I ride my bike there at least once a week after work and hike the trail. The restrooms are usually closed by the time we are leaving, when you might actually use them. Will the fees keep the restrooms open longer? No. The bike rack is out in the rain, on the grass. Will the fees go towards putting a shelter over the rack to improve our experience? No. A few times a year we bike there with my nephews to skip rocks, look for cool rocks along the water's edge and maybe let their dog take a swim. That will now be a \$20 outing for us each time...for what? Does the dog swimming for 5-10 minutes cost the FS anything? Do our bikes tear up \$20 worth of pavement? Is the FS paying workers to go fetch the rocks we skip and put them back on the shore? No, no and no.

Yes, raise the fee for using facilities that require maintenance but not for people who do nothing but walk on public land without leaving a trace that they were ever there.