

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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THE FIX IS IN

Report Charges Federal Land Agencies With Suppressing Public Participation In Fee Decisions

DURANGO, CO The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition today released a report charging the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management with intentionally suppressing public involvement in the implementation of access fees on public lands.

The report, entitled "The Fix Is In," provides examples from around the country showing that the federal advisory committee process that is supposed to bring the public to the table when fee decisions are being made is instead keeping the public out.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) requires that new Forest Service and BLM fees, as well as fee changes, be recommended for approval by Recreation Resource Advisory Committees, or RecRACs, before they can be implemented. Committee members are appointed by the Forest Service and the BLM to represent a variety of public lands users. The FLREA requires that the agencies document general public support for each fee proposal they submit, before the RecRAC can recommend approval of the proposal.

The most fundamental problem with the process, according to Western Slope No-Fee Coalition President Kitty Benzar, is the committee selection process. "Members are supposed to represent the public, but they are hand-picked by the Forest Service and BLM. They are from groups that are beholden to the agencies for their particular recreational activity, and are likely to do the agencies' bidding," she explained.

To date, the RecRACs have approved at least 523 fee increases and 228 new fee sites in less than two years. Only 27 fee proposals have been turned down.

"It's a rubber-stamp operation," said Benzar.

The report cites and substantiates numerous cases where fee proposals have been approved without the required documentation of public support, and even in the face of documented public opposition. Other problems with the process include:

- Meetings held on weekdays when ordinary citizens can't conveniently attend.

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- Meeting dates and agendas withheld from the public and changed at the last minute.
- RecRACs holding meetings by telephone or attending members-only field trips, in violation of open-meeting regulations.
- Communications from the public to RecRAC committee members being filtered, censored, and misrepresented by agency officials.
- Minutes documenting decisions made by RecRACs delayed for months before publication, and not including specifics of recommendations or individual vote tallies.

Three case studies describe efforts in Idaho, Colorado, and Illinois that succeeded in blocking some fee proposals. In those cases, according to Benzar, "Ordinary citizens took it into their own hands to do what the Forest Service and BLM had failed to do. They got the word out about the fees that were proposed, when and where the RecRAC would be meeting, and how to submit comments. These federal agencies have even more tools available to get the word out, if they really want to. Why aren't they?"

Benzar asserts that the agencies are intentionally making minimal efforts to involve the public because when the public is really involved, many fee proposals will fail.

"Opposition to public lands fees remains strong nationwide," she said. "This should be taken into account by the RecRAC committees and the agencies, not suppressed or ignored. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are presenting Congress and the public with a false picture of public involvement in fee decisions."

The Coalition's report can be downloaded at
<http://westernslopenofee.org/index2.php?display=yes&pageid=15>