

## Lawsuit challenges Adventure Pass fees in national forests

By Cheri Carlson

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Four hikers, including two Ojai men, sued the U.S. Forest Service this week, challenging the agency's right to charge visitor fees at four Southern California national forests.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court Tuesday, follows similar efforts elsewhere in the country. In February, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with petitioners challenging the legality of fees at Mount Lemmon in Arizona.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act allows fees in "high-impact" recreation areas that have specific amenities available, including picnic tables, security services and developed parking. The Arizona lawsuit alleged the Forest Service went too far by charging those parking their cars just to picnic, hike or camp in undeveloped areas. The California suit follows a similar argument.

"The main problem my clients have ... is they're doing this where there are no amenities," said Rene Voss, one of the attorneys representing the four hikers. They park on the side of the road near a trail to hike, and the Forest Service signs say they need to pay the fee, he said.

In California, the fee is called an Adventure Pass and costs \$5 per day or \$30 per year. It is required for recreational users in the Los Padres, Angeles, Cleveland and San Bernardino forests.

Forest Service spokesman John Heil said Friday that the agency cannot comment on pending litigation. The Forest Service has 60 days to answer the complaint.

Earlier this year, Forest Service officials announced plans to reduce the number of areas requiring such fees from 90 to 26 nationwide. The proposal was prompted by a fee study that started about two years ago.

Before such a plan can take effect, however, officials say it must go through a public review process. That includes a hearing in front of a citizens' advisory group in the spring.

Under the proposal, Los Padres would require the passes at a few locations, but they would be eliminated at Rose Valley, Goldhill, Ballinger and for most of the year at Mount Pinos.



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