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**Scrapped fee proposal could end up helping DuPont**



Jason

Guidry, DuPont State Forest Supervisor

By Bill Moss, Published: April 28, 2016

A funny thing happened on the way to imposing user fees for DuPont State Forest.

The fees are dead for now but the money may come anyway.

State Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler surprised legislators and angered many park users when he rolled out a new fee schedule this month — exploiting a revenue-raising option called “dynamic pricing” that the Legislature had authorized.

But Troxler got ahead of the legislators, who are answerable to constituents. Many of the constituents don’t like the idea of fees.

“It’s going to be chaos,” Dick Thompson, an original member of the small army that formed Friends of DuPont Forest to save the land from development 17 years ago.

Although Troxler got brushed back by legislators, he could wind up with as much money as the fees

would have generated. State Rep. Chuck McGrady told Agriculture officials that if they would itemize the capital and personnel needs, he'd work to fund them in this year's budget.

In many ways the forest has become a victim of its own success.

Last Tuesday night in Brevard, forest supervisor Jason Guidry led the Friends of DuPont Forest through a slide show documenting the steady increase in DuPont use. The 2,200-acre forest drew 683,000 visitors last year, nearly seven times the number that visited when it first opened in 2002. Visits have spiked in unpredictable ways. By tracking social media traffic, Guidry showed why hit movie *The Hunger Games*, which was filmed in the forest, and last year's blue ghost firefly season had drawn big crowds.

The state Department of Agriculture says the popularity of the forest is taxing the ability of the state Forest Service to accommodate visitors. To pay for improvements and more personnel, the Forest Service proposed a fee schedule of \$6 to \$12 depending on the day and parking lot. An annual pass would be available for \$30 for North Carolina residents and \$70 for out-of-state visitors. The forest service calculated the cost at \$2.31 per person based on average car occupancy and said that was in line with other fees charged by the U.S. Forest Service, private recreation areas and state parks.

"We need day-use fees," Guidry told the Friends of DuPont Forest. "I'm looking at charging more where we have the most use. If you come to the forest on the Fourth of July maybe you don't use Hooker Falls. Maybe you go to Fawn Lake and pay less. I want the price to be reasonable and comparable to other public lands."

Figures show that 50 percent of the forest users come from North Carolina, 18 percent from South Carolina and 9 percent from Florida. "People are coming that don't necessarily pay" for the forest operations through taxes.

The Friends of Dupont Forest anted up \$50,000 in seed money for restrooms at Hooker Falls, identified as one of the highest priority needs. Guidry unveiled a slide with the sticker shock price of \$465,000 for the facility — \$50,000 for architectural plans, \$225,000 for the building, \$125,000 for wastewater treatment, \$20,000 for a well, \$15,000 for paving and signage and \$5,000 for testing. With the use that is projected, "you're right on the border of needing a wastewater treatment plant," he said.

Guidry told the forest supporters that as long as the Legislature had put "dynamic pricing" on the table, he would "put my best foot forward" in advocating for it.

"Charging fees is definitely a big initiative and it's not going to be easy," he said. "But our problems are not easy. We have big needs, in my opinion millions of dollars worth over time.

Thompson, of the Friends of the Forest, says the fees would only reduce visits, anger regular users and hurt the nonprofit's ability to raise money.

DuPont Forest, he said in an email, "funded currently by the AG Department's operating budget. It does not have access to the N.C. Parks And Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) nor the funds approved in the recent \$2 billion bond. Gorges State Park (with 154,000 visitors in 2015 compared) does receive funds for construction from PARTF and the bond. This is grossly out of kilter in terms of need. ...

These fees, once enacted will never go away and undoubtedly will increase over time."

The fee proposal also exposed a rift in the Friends of DuPont Forest. Its board endorsed the fee schedule.

"The board is committed to supporting Jason Guidry's fee schedule proposals," FODF president Bev Parlier said. "We feel a continuous stream of revenue will fund much needed infrastructure."

Thompson sees the parks and recreation trust fund grants and other sources as the better option.

"McGrady is working hard to try to get an appropriation through," he said. "Right now, if it goes through it would be like a one-time appropriation. That might break the logjam to help get into that PARTF in the future."

Thompson recalled his long history with the forest, including the effort that ended with conserving the land when the state bought the property from developer Jim Anthony.

"I was there," he said. "I witnessed that event when the governor and the council of state approved that

purchase in October 2000. The Forest Service has been good to work with. They've been helpful folks but they're not geared for nor do they have the budget for a recreation facility."

Once the state takes possession of the so-called donut hole — the 400 acres around the plant — it will also gain a recreational lake. Operated by the company for employees, Lake DERA (for DuPont Employees Recreation Association) had a campground and bathhouse.

The Friends of DuPont Forest had another meeting scheduled for Tuesday "to try to hash out some of these issues," Thompson said. "Beverly Parlier is a good lady and is working hard to be president for FODF and it's not an easy job. It's like trying to herd cats. She gets tied up in being a good soldier. It was good that the fee structure was presented because it brought these issues to the table. If Chuck and the others are able to get an appropriation through then we live to fight another day."

1 Comment



[Tom Parlier](#)

I want to clarify that Dick Thompson is not speaking for the board of directors of FODF. The board endorses the fee schedule proposed by Forest Supervisor Jason Guidry.

-Bev Parlier, president, FODF