Forest fee program fails
Bookkeeping 101

The Forest Service’s fee demonstration program just failed Bookkeeping 101. The congressionally mandated pay-to-play program that began in 1997 imposes a fee on hikers, bikers, back-country skiers and other non-commercial users of public forest lands.

This week U.S. Attorney Betty Richardson told the Forest Service her office would not prosecute people ticketed for not paying the fee because prosecutions cost "too much."

She charged that the Forest Service had shifted the cost of prosecutions to her office without her agreement. Such prosecutions—similar to enforcement of parking tickets—have never been part of her budget.

A deputy U.S. attorney in Richardson’s office called the fees "unfair" because the Forest Service did not create a system that can ensure every user pays.

The U.S. attorneys drove home points raised early on in public hearings. Apparently, no one listened.

When the one and only hearing on the controversial forest fees was held in Ketchum in 1998, one of the first questions asked was, "How much will fee collection and enforcement cost?"

A surprised public listened as a Forest Service spokesman said the Forest Service had done no cost projections on collection, enforcement or
prosecution.

Members of the public speculated that the fees collected would not be enough to cover the costs of the program, let alone fund forest improvements. They urged forest officials and U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, who was at the hearing through the magic of a speakerphone, to do the simple arithmetic.

They didn’t.

Forest Service personnel who would never think of going on a long wilderness trip without a map, went ahead and undertook the congressionally mandated fee pilot program without charting a path. The Forest Service left Richardson to shoulder her new work load alone, while it merrily spent its newly found "free money" on trail maintenance and new outhouses.

Now, forest officials are scurrying to "solve the problem" by meeting with Richardson.

Richardson should quickly calculate what it will cost her office to prosecute non-payers. She should give the Forest Service a bill along with an estimate for future services.

It’s a good bet the bill, along with the cost of toll booths and fee stations that might make the system fair, will exceed the $260,000 in fees collected since 1997 when the program began.

With bill in hand, the Forest Service should declare the fee program a failure, go back to Congress, and get its funding from the proper place—from federal income tax revenues.