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Opposition to Fee Demo Program Grows in Colorado Delegation

Opposition to the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) continues to grow among members of Colorado’s delegation to the U.S. Congress. Senator Wayne Allard and Representatives Diana DeGette and Bob Schaffer recently joined Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell in opposing making the Fee Demo program permanent.

Allard, DeGette, and Schaffer all acknowledged the important role public lands play in Colorado and expressed concern that the Fee Demo program constitutes double taxation and weakens congressional oversight of the federal land management agencies. Studies showing that fees exclude low-income citizens and GAO audits that have revealed serious financial management problems were cited as additional reasons for withdrawing their support.

“The demonstration program was intended by Congress to be a way of helping the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to offset the increased use of our public lands,” said Allard. “It clearly has not worked and we need to go back to the drawing board.”

The three latest Colorado delegates to say “no” to Fee Demo add their voices to that of Senator Campbell, who recently charged in a constituent letter, “Some demonstration projects have taken a course we did not intend in Congress some six years ago.” Campbell expressed his many concerns at a recent hearing on Senate Bill 2607 before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. The bill would permanently allow recreational user fees on all federal lands.

Grassroots opponents to Fee Demo have become increasingly vocal in Colorado. Numerous elected bodies have passed resolutions opposing the program, including nine County Commissions and the Colorado State Legislature. Protest demonstrations in the Ouray area have received national attention, and ten new fee sites for picnicking on the White River National Forest are drawing citizen ire. On the Front Range, opponents are challenging the Fee Demo area at Mt Evans, where the Forest Service charges a $10 toll for use of a state highway.
Originally a two-year test program created by a rider on a “must-pass” appropriations bill, Fee Demo has been extended three times and is currently due to end in 2004 unless renewed by Congress or made permanent by new legislation.