Western Slope No-Fee Coalition

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The U.S. Forest Service has moved to pre-empt Congress by implementing a national pass for access to all National Forests in April 2003.

Fearing that the Fee Demo program will be allowed to expire as scheduled in September 2004, the Forest Service is bypassing Congress and implementing a National Pass administratively. Teri Cleeland, USFS Recreation Fee Demonstration Program Leader, stated in a February 11 internal memo that “legislation may force action that is unfavorable for all agencies. This step forward could alter that possibility.” She goes on to state that “This action broadens the concept of ‘entrance’ fees to include those fee sites that provide a basic recreation experience, as opposed to more specialized sites like campgrounds.”

Mounting congressional opposition to the Fee Demo program has thrown its future into doubt. With the demonstration program’s expiration date looming, the Forest Service has become increasingly desperate for legislation to make it permanent. But last session, one permanent authorization bill failed to make it out of committee and another never even got introduced. So far this session the idea of permanent fees has failed to find congressional support, and no bill has so far been introduced.

Key elements that the Forest Service plans to implement administratively in April are Basic Fees for sites such as picnic areas, trailheads, and unimproved areas. Expanded Fees will be charged on top of and in addition to Basic Fees. These will cover campground use, interpretive programs, and backcountry uses such as mountain climbing. A National Pass will be required for entrance to both National Forests and National Parks.

When Congress authorized Fee Demo as an appropriations rider in 1996, fees were allowed in a limited number of sites for a two year test period, which has since been extended twice. The Forest Service has subsequently succeeded in
Robert Funkhouser, President of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which actively opposes permanence for Fee Demo, said “These changes by the Forest Service are meant not just to influence Congress, but to tie Congress’s hands in dealing with this unpopular program. With congressional opposition building in both the House and Senate, selling National Passes in April for a program that may be cancelled next year is unethical and unwarranted. The Forest Service knows that it’s harder to kill a program after it is in place.”

Coalition Co-Founder Kitty Benzar added “There has never been congressional debate or public hearings on Fee Demo. This move shows that the Forest Service fears they will lose the program if public input is taken into consideration. It’s a desperate move to make fees permanent and universal by administrative action since they know they’re losing in Congress. This is nothing more than a new tax on Americans who already pay to manage their National Forests. It should not be allowed to go forward.”