Green Mountain fee increase nixed

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SUMMIT COUNTY — A U.S. Forest Service plan to increase modest camping and day use fees for the popular recreation areas around Green Mountain Reservoir has been shelved after a review by top agency officials in Washington, D.C.

The fee increase was announced several months ago as part of the first-ever formal management plan for the area, one of the few local recreation sites with a relatively undeveloped feel.

But increased use and abuse of the area has resulted in resource damage, including litter and erosion. The new management plan was aimed at creating a safe environment while providing good stewardship for natural resources.

The fees for this summer will remain at $5 per vehicle, per day, for day use or camping, said Ken Waugh, recreation staff officer for the Dillon Ranger District. The campgrounds and day use facilities at Prairie Point and McDonald Flats are operated under concession, and the fees there will stay at $10 for camping and $7 for day use, Waugh said.

The decision will stretch the district’s budget for the area this summer, Waugh said. “What we had hoped is to have $10,000 annually for improvements,” he said. Instead, the Forest Service will use the money, as well as funds that are already saved, to cover operating costs. That includes keeping the area fully staffed with four rangers this summer, he said.

Waugh said the fee increase was implemented after extensive grassroots planning and public input. The plan was approved at the White River National Forest level, the regional level and by national recreation planners.

“But a staffer for Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) saw the plan and said, ‘You can’t raise the fees without going to a recreation advisory committee,’ which we don’t have yet,” Waugh said.
Craig has been lobbied heavily by anti-fee groups including the Western Slope No Fee Coalition, which charges that the Forest Service has implemented illegal fees at numerous recreation sites without complying with the terms of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, the federal law that permanently authorized controversial public land recreation fees. According to the coalition, up to 75 percent of the fee sites are illegal.

Waugh said the agency must now contact all the people who commented on the proposed plan to notify them of the return to the status quo.

Transcripts of congressional testimony on the fee issue can be viewed at http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate/senate08ch109.html.

An analysis of the Forest Service fee sites and their legal status can be downloaded from the Western Slope No Fee Coalition at www.WesternSlopeNoFee.org.