National forest fees grow like the trees
Michael Doyle

Overnight rates at some Sequoia National Forest campgrounds are jumping 70 percent this year, as hard-pressed Forest Service officials scramble for new funds. The fee increases still leave even the priciest campgrounds a relative bargain at $17 a night. But the new charges at five of Sequoia’s 54 campgrounds also portend things to come, in California and nationwide. Spurred by Congress and squeezed by other costs, national forest managers will be jacking up fees to support local projects.

“We're trying to walk that fine line between having reasonable access to the great outdoors … and providing the money needed for maintenance,” said Nathan Rangel, a Sierra Nevada river guide and member of a key Forest Service advisory committee. Though some lawmakers and activists want to curtail the higher fees, which they consider unwarranted, the increases have momentum for now.

Rangel serves on the California Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, an 11-member panel now quietly shaping what people will pay to use Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recreation facilities. Together, the two federal agencies manage 35 million acres in California — about one-third of the entire state. Congress gave the agencies enhanced powers to raise fees in 2004. Guided by the newly formed advisory committees, officials are starting to do so. In California, certain Sequoia, Eldorado and Mendocino national forest campgrounds began charging more in January, along with a few other recreation sites statewide.

Rising fees

In the Sequoia forest, for instance, campsites at Kennedy Meadows and four other sites that once cost $10 a night will now cost $17. Hikers on the popular Eagle Falls trail near Lake Tahoe will pay $5 starting in May, instead of the current $3. Off-road adventurers on the BLM’s Clear Creek area that touches western Fresno and Stanislaus counties face new vehicle fees totaling $15.

No fee increases are planned right now in the Los Padres National Forest in San Luis Obispo County.

Most of the money raised through higher fees will remain for local projects. “These were very, very minimal increases,” said advisory committee member Danna Stroud, tourism and recreation director for the town of Mammoth Lakes, “and we look at it as an investment in the facility.”

Congress gave federal land managers the power to raise fees and keep the money starting in the mid-1990s. The 2004 law extended this power. Through the funding raised by its prior fees, for instance, the Sequoia National Forest in 2006 spent $310,441 on projects including painting picnic tables and hiring rangers.
Parks crave funds
Officials crave the additional money, in part because higher firefighter costs have been burning through the Forest Service budget.
“These fee increases will help us maintain the sites to the level and quality people have come to expect,” Sequoia Forest supervisor Tina Terrell explained last year.
Yosemite and other national parks have used similar fee increases over the past decade to pour millions of additional dollars into local projects. Yosemite raised its per-car entrance fee to $20 from $5 in early 1997, under a “fee demonstration” program that has since become permanent.
At some point, though, visitors begin howling, and lawmakers jerked to attention.
In June, for instance, public protests caused the National Park Service to retreat from a proposal to further boost Yosemite’s entrance fee to $25.
In December, Democratic Sen. Max Baucus of Montana introduced legislation repealing the new Forest Service and BLM fee program. Baucus has since collected three other Senate co-sponsors, and he has the support of some environmental groups.

Little action so far
Neither of California’s two Democratic senators have cosponsored Baucus’ bill. It has not yet had a congressional hearing or incited discussion on the House or Senate floors, and a companion House bill has not yet been introduced.
The California advisory committee meets again in June, when Forest Service spokesman John Heil said additional Forest Service fee increases will be considered.