WASHINGTON — Republicans and Democrats were both sharply critical of recreation fees charged to hike, picnic and recreate on federal lands at a U.S. House hearing Wednesday.

Although recreation access fees were created 12 years ago, they've come under new fire in Congress after Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., introduced a bill to repeal them in December. No such legislation has been introduced in the House, and the hearing Wednesday was to get an update on the program.

Local and national forest officials say that money is vital to maintaining recreation areas and filling in for falling maintenance budgets. But opponents, including several House members, said the agency isn't doing a good enough job accounting for how fees are collected and where the money is spent.

Although the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service cited surveys showing most forest users accept the fees, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee Chairman Ral Grijalva, D-Ariz., said the program is not popular.

“We have been flooded each day with testimonials from citizens of the West calling for the repeal of this act,” Grijalva said.

Since the recreation fee program was created in 1996, the fees have generated about $2 billion for federal agencies, including $351 million for the Forest Service, according to the committee staff.

For the most part, the fees are $5 at trailheads or $30 for a 12-month Northwest Forest Pass.

Deschutes fees

Deschutes National Forest received $562,438 from the fees that it spent on maintenance last year. About half of that money went toward programs at Newberry National Volcanic Monument, said Deschutes National Forest Supervisor John Allen.

The rest went to maintenance and improvements at 57 sites on the forest, according to Forest Service data. There are no fee sites in Ochoco National Forest, according to its Web site.

Allen said the recreation fees are needed on the Deschutes.
“When it costs half a million to replace a boat launch … it costs a lot of money to keep things going,” Allen said.

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Springfield, was less certain at Wednesday’s hearing of the program’s effectiveness. A longtime critic of recreation fees and a member of the subcommittee, DeFazio said he’s concerned that dollars collected at local trailheads and campsites aren’t adequately accounted for.

“It’s disappearing into the model of bureaucracy,” DeFazio said.

DeFazio also said he’s concerned fees are being distributed unevenly. Many city-dwellers buy their passes close to home, then travel to forests like the Deschutes to hike or backpack, he said.

Allen said the forest has no way to track how often that occurs.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, who represents Central, Eastern and part of Southern Oregon, has been critical of recreation fees in the past but has said he will not comment further on them unless there is legislation introduced in the House.

Kitty Benzar, the president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, formed to oppose recreation fees, said they’re a big reason the number of visits to national forests is falling nationwide, although visits aren’t declining in Deschutes National Forest.

“This decline in visitation is not good for our country,” Benzar said. “We should not be deterring them from visiting our public lands.”

Rep. Ralph Regula, R-Ohio, authored the 2004 law that made recreation fees on federal lands permanent, after the 1996 law was set to expire. He said he’s been pleased with how it has been implemented.

“I think maybe it needs some tweaking, but I think the program itself is essentially right.”

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