GOLDEN — Against a background of mounting congressional opposition, an advisory group once again denied a Forest Service proposal to increase daily and seasonal fees at Green Mountain Reservoir.

The Forest Service wasn’t able to show general public support for the plan, panel members said, asking the agency to arrange a site visit to the popular campgrounds and beaches at the reservoir north of Silverthorne before voting on the fee increase. Unless the regional Forest Service frees up some money for Green Mountain, the group’s decision means the agency may have to cut staffing at Green Mountain Reservoir this summer, said Ken Waugh, recreation staff officer for the Dillon District.

Waugh had hoped to raise the camping fees from $5 to $10 and the season pass fees from $25 to $65 for the rest of this summer.

The Forest Service budget for managing the Green Mountain sites was based on the higher fee structure, and the no-vote will leave the agency in a bind.

“We have an obligation to operate the sites at the level the public expects,” Waugh said late Tuesday, trying to win approval as several members of the advisory group started packing their briefcases toward the end of the meeting.

The increased price of the season passes for Green Mountain spurred numerous negative comments, said Michael Blanton, of Jackson County, who represents local-government interests on the stakeholder panel.

“I’ve heard a lot of resistance to raising the annual pass — $25 to $65. That’s a lot to stomach, especially in this economy,” Blanton said, adding that he was not likely to vote in favor of a fee increase after hearing from Kremmling-area residents.

Because of the makeup of the panel and the quirky voting requirements, Blanton’s stance on Green Mountain left the agency’s plan for the area dead in the water, Waugh said.

The next step for the Forest Service is to try and educate the public even more about the need for increased fees at the camping and picnic areas around the reservoir, he said.

Other members of the recreation-resource advisory committee raised concerns about the inclusion of the Cataract Lake trailhead in the Green Mountain fee program. Those questions hit close to the philosophical core of the controversy over pay-to-play issue.

While the public may grudgingly accept fees as a necessary evil for public lands staffing at heavily used recreation fees, there is more resistance to paying for parking and access to wilderness areas.

Waugh said the agency plans to add a ranger station at Cataract Lake to help with wilderness education efforts. He also pointed out the need for increased law enforcement at the well-used trailhead.
The same advisory group was unable to decide on the Green Mountain proposal last February, when members struggled to find a definition for the terminology in the federal law that requires the Forest Service show public support for the controversial “pay-to-play” proposals.

As a next step, the Forest Service will take another look at the fee structure and budget for Green Mountain, Waugh said.

A future fee-hike proposal could include a budget option that leaves out the Cataract trailhead revenue.

The agency may also reconsider the season-pass pricing on the next go-round, he said.

The Forest Service wants to chip away at a deferred $5 million maintenance backlog with the Green Mountain fee revenue, using about $10,000 annually to upgrade facilities.

Another $10,000 would come from a regional pot of fee money under an internal agency grant program, Waugh said.

The Forest Service initially launched the Green Mountain fee program because the area was being hammered by heavy use.

“Until people see the benefits (of the fees) they’re not going to trust us,” said Steve Sherwood, the ranger in charge of recreation for the Rocky Mountain region. “We’ve got an area out there that’s being sacrificed.”

Following through on promised improvements will help the agency build trust, he said.

“We need to show that we care about sanitation and all that other stuff, and that it ultimately benefits the public,” Sherwood said.

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