EDITORIAL: Red Rock fees

How is the BLM spending the money it already has?

If the job is spending money, who you gonna call?

The federal government.

In 2003, the Elko Daily Free Press reported that Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Supervisor Bob Vaught -- pressed by a local lawmaker and others protesting the Forest Service's actions in closing off access to public lands in Jarbidge Canyon -- admitted spending $15,000 to hire Enviroclean Septic Service out of Twin Falls to swoop in by helicopter and clean a single outhouse at Snowslide Gulch at the end of South Canyon Road, in lieu of accepting an offer by Assemblyman John Carpenter, R-Elko, and local contractor Mike Lattin to arrange for the work to be done by citizen volunteers for free.

Why? Because, to accept that offer, the Forest Service would have had to allow the public to enter its own public lands.

But $15,000 was chickenfeed compared with an expenditure first celebrated by USA Today in late 1987, when the newspaper reported "Sometime in the summer of 1988, in the wondrous high country of Montana's Glacier National Park, construction workers will put the finishing touches on a new federal building. Designed by six architects and engineers employed by the National Park Service, the two-story structure is truly unique: a $1 million, four-hole outhouse that will serve only a few thousand of the 2 million visitors who flock to Glacier each year. ..."

"To Ed Venetz, the private contractor who is supervising the job, the rustic, 28-by-19-foot outhouse is a thing of beauty. 'She's just a Plain Jane, like sitting in a prison toilet,' Venetz says of his creation, 'but she will last forever.'"

Bureau of Land management officials now in charge of the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, a few miles west of Las Vegas, have yet to match those kinds of breathtaking expenditures. But they're working on it.

Red Rock is not your high-tech tourist destination. There are no rides, steamboats or miniature railroads -- not even a petting zoo. (Most of that stuff is available down the road, at the private Bonnie Springs Ranch.)

But bureau officials have nonetheless decided the $5 per vehicle and $2 per motorcycle they've been charging since 1997 for those who want to transit the conservation area's 13-mile scenic drive are not enough. The entrance fees are going to be increased, BLM officials said Tuesday -- though they can't yet say by how much.

Fee collections put $1.6 million in the local BLM's coffers in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30.
Where does that money go? $178,000 per year now goes to "fee collection expenses." When you add the cost of "interpretative assistance" -- you know, "That's a rattlesnake" -- to that of "fee booth operation," you reach $408,000 per year.

A draft budget planning document shows more than 50 BLM staff members are now involved with "maintaining and operating" Red Rock Canyon's facilities, which include no known moving parts except a couple of gates. Their jobs range from "law enforcement" to "personnel management."

Yep. Personnel to manage the personnel.

What kind of "law enforcement"? Glad you asked. Before the BLM took over, local residents could safely target shoot in a box canyon off Lee Canyon Road, far from any human habitation, 13 miles north of Red Rock Canyon. Today, federal "law enforcement" rangers from Red Rock travel up there to warn locals they can't target shoot in the area, now posted with signs that puzzlingly warn hunting is allowed, but "not shooting."

"I'm not very keen on fees to visit our public lands, our taxpayer-supported lands," comments John Hiatt, conservation chairman of the Red Rock Audubon Society. "In a way, we are getting taxed twice. The public owns the lands, and now we're getting charged to use them."

The Red Rock staff list actually includes 54 job titles. One vacant position is a "budget analyst." Perhaps, if they get their fee hikes, the BLM can hire that analyst ... to help them determine how many more "fee collection stations" they need.

At that point, estimated personnel costs for federal "supervision" of a 13-mile scenic road will run $741,988.81 per year.

Not counting outhouses.

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