Bills aim to curb fees

I've been bugging Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, ever since I found out that Sen. Max Baucus, D-Montana, had a bill up to repeal fees charged by the Forest Service for the public to use its own lands.

McCarthy told me Tuesday he's been working with the House Resources Committee on a similar bill to match Baucus' effort.

"I'm working with other offices to bring in greater accountability to any fees charged by the Forest Service."

He hasn't seen the final wording yet, as Congress is out on break.

That would dovetail nicely with Baucus' S868, which would repeal the 2004 Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act.

It would bring the Forest Service back to the 1965 policy which limited what the agency could charge the public.

The Baucus bill, similar to one he and Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho, wrote in 2007, is awaiting a hearing in the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

The Forest Service contends that budget cuts have made it impossible to keep up with trash, toilet needs, vandalism and enforcement. The fees, it has said, are necessary, though still inadequate, for basic upkeep.

I would be fine with the fees, except they don't seem to have improved service dramatically at heavily used areas and the Forest Service has been incapable of accounting for how it's spent the money. My suspicion is that's not exactly unintended.

If the Baucus bill or its House cousin passes, I have a feeling the Forest Service will find some way to use the tax dollars we already give them to keep our lands open, safe and trash free.

-- Lois Henry