WE'RE WELL DOWN THIS SLIPPERY SLOPE

Recreation Fees Big Part of Public Land Privatization Plan

While every major environmental group ignores the issue of runaway recreation fees on the National Forests, the Forest Service keeps creating more ways for us to pay more for using our land and partners with corporate interests that would like nothing better than to privatize, commercialize and even dispose of our public lands. Will greens groups continue to set on the sidelines and watch it happen?

By Bill Schneider, 3-03-10

For five years, I’ve been railing against the recreational fee frenzy going on within the Forest Service, and after reading hundreds of comments (online and offline), I’ve noticed a common theme that I should address. Why, manycommenters ask, am I so concerned about these relatively small, pay-for-play fees when we’re facing colossal environmental issues such as climate change, roadless lands protection, mining law reform, and energy development?

My answer is, this is big, too. The trend toward more and larger recreation fees fits perfectly with the plans of those who would like nothing better than to privatize our public lands.

I know it only seems like a measly $5 here or $25 there, but it’s the old nibbled-to-death strategy—you hardly notice it happening until one day, you realize you can no longer find an affordable place to hike or hunt or camp. Interestingly, I believe every major green group opposes privatizing public lands, yet not one does or says anything about this obvious attempt to do it. Go figure.

The primary voice among the green community comes from a tiny nonprofit called Wild Wilderness. Here, executive director Scott Silver serves the role of that proverbial voice in the wilderness nobody seems to hear.

Not a believer? Consider this admission by Warren Meyer, a board member of the National Forest Recreation Association (NFRA), the main lobby for private concessionaires. On his personal blog, he stated: “As many of you know, I am in the business of privatizing public recreation.”

That revealing quote is just one little gem in a massive treasure chest of documentation Silver has amassed on how recreation fees foreshadow public land privatization. I wish I had space for more of it here, but you can see it all on his website.

The privatization agenda was the vision of President Ronald Reagan and was first implemented by former FS Chief Dale Robertson with major help from the main lobby for privatization, the American Recreation Coalition (ARC). For the past 30 years, with the ARC and NFRA leading the way, private concessionaires have exerted increasing pressure upon the FS to privatize public recreation, and it’s working.
A recent controversy over a proposed rule change cutting discounts and passes for seniors and the disabled is simply into another step toward ultimate goal of privatization of public recreation. It does so by lowering the bar for the creation of new recreation fee sites and allowing concessionaires to charge for, and retain, more fees at these new sites and current sites.

Concerning this current red alert over the Forest Service’s attempt to renege on “lifetime” promises given senior and disabled public land users and the Idaho congressional delegation’s opposition to it, Silver has a more sweeping viewpoint.

He applauds the Idaho delegation jumping in to oppose the proposed rule, but he would’ve preferred they be “more forceful” in pointing out the more “profound impacts,” such as the fact the proposed rule hurts everybody, not just the elderly and disabled, and that it’s all about “more privatization.”

“The proposed rule change is not merely a reprehensible denial of implied privilege,” he told NewWest.Net, in an email, “it is flagrantly illegal.”

In his official comments on the proposed rule, he provided detailed documentation as to why the proposed rule is not only a broken promise, but it also violates the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), the authority the FS uses--or more accurately, misuses--to charge more and higher fees.

Silver also contends that the proposed rule is the result of closed door meetings between the FS and special interest organizations such as the ARC and is a direct response to pressure from concessionaire “partners” who only want more profit off public lands. The FS, he insists, has a “greater allegiance” to private concessionaires than to the public the agency is supposed to serve.

Even worse, Silver believes the plan to ax senior discounts is meant to attract the public’s outrage and hide real goal--allowing concessionaires to charge more and higher fees for everybody. He predicts political pressure will prompt the FS to compromise and continue to give seniors and the disabled some reduced discounts to make it appear like a victory for the public. Meanwhile, the FS will get what it really wants--more latitude for concessionaires to charge fees and make more profit off managing public recreation.

And as noted frequently in my past columns, there’s also the issue of double taxation. We pay for the privilege to use our public lands every year on April 15, which has been the main impetus behind S. 868, a bill introduced by Senators Max Baucus (D-MT) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) to repeal FLREA.

(Incidentally, just in case you’re wondering why we see fewer recreation fees in the National Forests of Idaho and Montana than everywhere else, I’m sure it has something to do with FS bosses trying to avoid controversy in the districts of these two powerful senators.)

So what’s the answer?
For starters, tacking S. 868 onto the next must-pass legislation as a rider would certainly do the trick, but we also need two more things to happen.

First, Congress needs to replace the fee income within the appropriations process to take pressure off FS employees to make more money on fees and concessions to save their jobs, and second, the Obama administration needs to put both feet on the administrative brakes to stop the reckless rush to hire private concessionaires to manage on our National Forests.

Exact figures are elusive, but roughly, the FS takes in $62 million per year in recreation fees and hardly any revenue from private concessionaires (another story for another time). I must ask, is this really a lot of money by federal budget standards? Let’s put $62 million in perspective.

Today, we can instantly find billions to fight endless wars (a trillion+ so far), bail out the too-big-to-fail banks (aka Wall Street Casinos), and provide unbudgeted federal aid for natural disasters. My pet evil, Goldman Sachs, makes a $41 million profit every day, even on weekends, and $62 million would just barely cover three years of Wells Fargo boss John Stumpf’s annual compensation. Getting out of the Middle East Wars one day early would save $42 million, so let’s leave two weeks earlier and replace FS recreation fee income for the next decade or more.

Come on, Congress. How hard is this? Just put it in the budget and do something for all of us. That’s only $116,000 per each of the 535 congressional and senatorial districts.

If you really need to raise my income taxes 0.001 percent to cover the cost, hey, go for it. This shouldn’t be necessary, but I’d willing to pay a little more as long as it’s on tax day instead of an extra five bucks at the next toll booth I see on a FS road.

But I’d prefer something like a 90 percent tax on any form of annual income over $500,000, all earmarked for managing public recreation on public lands by public employees. Or better yet, build five instead of the six nuclear submarines currently under construction, which would save enough to reimburse the FS for lost fee income for the rest of the 21st Century. Are nuclear subs really a good investment in the future compared to keeping public lands public?

As I write this, the Obama administration is hardly blinking at spending $200 million per year for several years to put just one terrorist on trial in New York City, with lots more terrorists waiting for their years in court. At least 20 states haven’t even accepted $5 billion each in federal stimulus funds because they have to match it, so that’s something like a $100 billion just sitting there for the taking. Meanwhile, we can’t find $62 million in a $2.65 trillion budget to stop the privatization of our public lands?

The point is, we can find this money. If our elected representatives don’t do it and our major green groups won’t even make it a priority issue, well, I guess we Americans can assume they favor privatizing our public lands.

Footnote: For more NewWest.Net coverage of the recreation fee issue, click here.

[End of article]
Hey Bill,

Thanks for the article! I know that there are plenty of people who would be willing to help out, they just need to know what to do to have the biggest and best impact.

You've made it clear that the costs to fund our public lands is minimal, especially in comparison to some obviously wasteful, current, budget and even non budgeted items. But, you've missed on the call to action.

Sure, "tacking S. 868 onto the next must-pass legislation as a rider would certainly do the trick, but we also need two more things to happen" is a clear order, but most folks, myself included, don't know where to begin....that's another conversation.

In the mean time, who are the people in congress that we need to contact to voice our demands? Perhaps a small list of things we can do or even a few links to the right people might be a good idea.

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