Senators Pushing to Rollback Fees for National Parks and Other Public Lands

Submitted by Kurt Repanshek on May 25, 2010 - 1:47am

A quartet of senators from Western states are pushing U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman to allow a hearing on their proposal to reduce the cost of visiting national parks and other public lands.

So far Sen. Bingaman, the New Mexico Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, hasn't put the Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act proposal on the committee's agenda.

That refusal prompted U.S. Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Testor of Montana and Mike Crapo and Jim Risch of Idaho to recently send Sen. Bingaman a letter asking him to schedule a hearing on their proposal.

As drafted, the legislation (SB 868) would repeal most provisions of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and restore the language of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 regarding recreation fees. One element of SB 868 would do away with the $80 America the Beautiful Public Lands Pass and return the $50 National Parks Pass.

The drive to rollback, if not completely remove, fees allowed under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act stem from the belief that the public shouldn't have to pay to access public lands.

According to the Western Slope No Fee Coalition, which long has lobbied to do away with entrance fees to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands, the proposed legislation would:
* For all agencies, fees will still be allowed at campgrounds, swimming sites and boat launches that have a defined minimum level of development, and for rental of cabins and lookouts.
* Entrance Fees will be allowed for NPS units and NPS will retain fee revenue within the agency with 80% to be spent at the site where collected. NPS will no longer charge additional fees for backcountry access or interpretive programs when an entrance fee has been paid.
* Increases to NPS Entrance Fees will be required to be submitted to Congress 60 days before taking effect.
* The $80 America the Beautiful Pass will be eliminated, and the $50 National Parks Pass and Golden Eagle Pass will be reinstated.
* Forest Service and BLM will be prohibited, as they were under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, from charging fees, either singly or in any combination, for drinking water, wayside exhibits, roads, overlook sites, visitor centers, scenic drives, toilet facilities, or solely for the use of picnic tables.
* Forest Service and BLM fee revenue will be paid, less 15% for administrative costs, to the Treasury for appropriation by Congress. This will eliminate the current system where those agencies keep all the money they can raise, which has resulted in fees being charged for parking, scenic overlooks, picnic tables, driving scenic roads, toilets, and many other basic services that should be supported with existing appropriated budgets.

**SUMMARY**

The Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act will restore language that worked well for over 30 years. It will preserve the ability of the public lands agencies to charge reasonable fees for specialized facilities and for National Park entrance. It will restore free use of basic facilities such as picnic tables and toilets and free general access to scenic trails, roads, and overlooks. It will restore Congressional oversight of the expenditure of fee revenues.

**BILL STATUS**

The Fee Repeal and Expanded Access Act of 2009 was introduced in the 111th Congress by Senator Max Baucus, Senator Mike Crapo, and Senator Jon Tester as bill number S.868. It has been assigned to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. The more co-sponsors it garners, the better the chance of passage. Please contact YOUR Senators through their web forms at [www.Senate.gov](http://www.Senate.gov) and ask them to join Senator Baucus in supporting S.868 to repeal the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and restore public access to public lands.

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**Comments**

Submitted by Volpe (not verified) on May 25, 2010 - 3:47am.

The public owns the parks and fees to enter are like charging me to go into my own backyard. “The public shouldn't have to pay to access public lands” makes sense. Charge fees for camping, boat rentals etc. but make sure that 100% of that money stays in the park.

Submitted by Gaelyn ([http://www.geogypsy.blogspot.com](http://www.geogypsy.blogspot.com)) (not verified) on May 25, 2010 - 6:29am.

I'd like to see access to public lands for free, however, then there needs to be an increase to these sites from Congress or they'll go broke and have to close.

Submitted by julie s. (not verified) on May 25, 2010 - 8:26am.

The people who complain about having to pay fees at National Parks, tend to be the same people who complain about the lack of facilities, staffing, amenities, etc. at the parks. All the things that require funding. How much of our tax dollars do you think the parks actually get? The spending request by President Bush for fiscal year 2009, included $515.4 billion for the Department of Defense and $10.6 billion for the Department of the Interior. How much of that DOI money do you think the NPS saw? And unfortunately a great deal of the money paid for camping, boat rentals, etc. actually goes to concessionaires, not the park itself. Unfortunately as it may be, entrance fees are necessary to keep most parks going.

Submitted by Roger (not verified) on May 25, 2010 - 11:28am.

It never takes long to drag President Bush into the mix. Anyway, we need to get beyond the notion that everything public is free. If the government has to pay for something, they must get the money from somewhere. Nothing is free! I'd rather pay a high entrance fee than higher taxes. At least with the entrance fee there's a chance that the NPS could keep the money instead of having it misspent by Congress. Entrance fees to NPS are still one of the best entertainment bargains anywhere.

Submitted by Volpe (not verified) on May 25, 2010 - 11:50am.

These aren’t amusement parks, keep the amenities, I come to see nature. And if you can't manage your budget don't make me pay for it.
Submitted by y_p_w (/users/y-p-w) on May 25, 2010 - 1:28pm.

Volpe:
These aren’t amusement parks, keep the amenities, I come to see nature. And if you can’t manage your budget don’t make me pay for it.

The NPS is more than just nature. It costs money to provide even basic visitor amenities such as maps, parking lots, and bathrooms. I suppose we could get back to nature by eliminating all designated bathrooms and just using the woods like the bears do.

At the very least, roads/trails need periodic maintenance, and the NPS generally provides maintenance for campgrounds.

Submitted by KBenzar (/users/kbenzar) on May 25, 2010 - 2:25pm.

"The spending request by (name redacted to avoid offense) for fiscal year 2009, included $515.4 billion for the Department of Defense and $10.6 billion for the Department of the Interior. How much of that DOI money do you think the NPS saw?"

Julie you may have meant your question rhetorically, but answers are available.

First, you must separate the President’s (any President’s) “spending request” from what Congress actually appropriated. During the (name redacted to avoid offense) administration, Congress typically appropriated more than the President requested for all of the public lands agencies. Presidential spending requests often bear little or no relationship to actual appropriations, and can be safely ignored.

For FY2009 Congress gave the NPS taxpayer funding of $2.2 Billion for Operations, $240 Million for Construction, and $684 Million for Recreation and Preservation. In addition the NPS collects about $172 million in entrance and other recreation fees every year, and is allowed to retain those mostly at the Park or other unit where they were collected.

The FY2010 Interior Appropriations bill has not been passed, and indications are that Congress will not be able to reach agreement. In that case they will approve a “continuing resolution” that keeps funding flat at the previous year’s level.

Senate bill S.868 would allow the NPS to continue to charge entrance fees and to keep the revenue mostly within the Park or other unit that collected it.

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KBenzar (/users/kbenzar)

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