Fees may be ahead to visit San Joaquin River gorge
Proposal will be heard at upcoming meetings.

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By Marek Warszawski / The Fresno Bee

Hikers, mountain bikers, anglers, hunters and horseback riders who enjoy the San Joaquin River Management Area likely will have to cough up a few bucks starting next spring.

A proposal to start charging user fees for parking, camping and interpretive programs at the 6,700-acre recreation area outside Auberry will be heard by the Pacific Southwest Recreation Resource Advisory Committee during its June 23-24 meeting in Mammoth Lakes.

Until now, the estimated 54,000-84,000 people who visit the gorge annually did so for free. But park manager Tracy Rowland said fees are necessary to offset the Bureau of Land Management's shrinking budget and internal grants that are no longer available.

The park's annual operating costs are $330,000, Rowland said.

"Our funding is getting cut every year," Rowland said. "We need new sources of income so we can maintain what we have now as well as expand visitor services in the future."

Under the proposal, all fees collected will be spent on park maintenance and operations, Rowland said.

Visitors would be charged $5 per vehicle to enter the park, $10 per night for camping ($15 for double and triple sites), $25 per night for using the horse camp and up to $20 for interpretive programs.

Fees would also be used to expand the park's trail system, adding permanent restrooms in certain areas and creating new interpretive exhibits, Rowland said.