VERDE VALLEY - Coconino National Forest officials have placed the Red Rock Pass program in a state of suspended animation pending a judge's recent opinion.

The Forest Service's decision, however, does not mean you can't or won't get a ticket if you park within the 160,000-acre Red Rock High Impact Recreation Area and fail to display a Red Rock Pass.

"We have asked our enforcement officers to back off on writing citations, although the decision to issue a warning or a citation remains at their discretion. There is no written discretion telling them they can or cannot.

"Nothing has changed. The Red Rock Pass is still in effect. But we are looking at what we can do to be in compliance with the judge's opinion, while keeping the program intact," Birkland says.

In September, federal Judge Mark Aspey dismissed a citation issued to Sedona resident Jim Smith for not displaying a Red Rock pass while parked at a remote trailhead.

The judge, in his 33-page decision, stated that the Forest Service could not charge a fee to park on National Forest land if no amenities such as restrooms, picnic tables or trash cans were being provided at the location.

"Unimproved sites have always been a gray area for the program. But the feel has always been that the improved areas and the unimproved areas were all interlinked," Birkland says. "But the judge is calling us on that and saying that's not the way he sees it."

The Coconino National Forest had 30 days to appeal the judge's decision, but chose not to.

"The Red Rock Pass was meant to be an educational program - an opportunity to teach people about such things as Leave No Trace. It was never intended to be heavily enforced or high-compliance. That's why we issue more notices of non-compliance than citations," Birkland says.
Birkland says the Forest Service would avail themselves of the services provided by an advisory group that assists the Bureau of Land Management in matters involving fees for use of public lands, if changes were to be made to the program.

"They are called the Recreation Advisory Committee. They will meet in December and we would like to meet with them and discuss where we are headed. But it would just be dialogue.

"If we come up with new a proposal we would take it before them in the spring, but only after we have had public input," she says.

A final decision on any changes would come from the regional forest supervisor in Albuquerque according to Birkland.

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