According to the Durango-based West Slope No Fee Coalition, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found unanimously last week that the U.S. Forest Service's recreation fee programs must allow citizens to park at trailheads and go for a hike without paying a fee.

The ruling is binding in nine western states and sets a nationwide legal precedent, said Kitty Benzar of the coalition.

The case involved user fees on a national forest in Arizona.

The Appeals Court found the U.S. Forest Service at fault for charging parking fees to people who go for a hike without using amenities such as picnic tables, trash cans and bathrooms located nearby, or who camp in dispersed, undeveloped parts of a national forest.

Judge Robert Gettleman, writing for the unanimous three-judge panel, stated in the ruling that "Everyone is entitled to enter national forests without paying a cent."

The Forest Service is studying the ruling, and has 60 days to request a rehearing, explained a coalition advisory.