Adventure Passes still needed in Los Padres, but changes on way

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Months after the Forest Service announced plans to dramatically scale back recreation fees, some California national forests still require them.

Changes to the fee program are on the way, officials said, but they must first go through a public review process that likely won't be completed until next year.

"Changes must be vetted by the public," said John Heil, a spokesman for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region.

This year, officials announced plans to reduce the number of areas requiring amenities fees to 26 nationwide from 90.

That proposal was prompted by a fee study that started about two years ago.

In California, the fee is called the Adventure Pass and is $5 per day or $30 per year.

It is required for recreational users in the Los Padres, Angeles, Cleveland and San Bernardino national forests.

Under the proposal, Los Padres would require the passes at a few locations, but they would be eliminated at Rose Valley, Goldhill, Ballinger and for most of the year at Mount Pinos.

The public review process likely will start this fall, Heil said. Plans also would go before a citizens' advisory group in spring, he said.

Meanwhile, Forest Service officials in some other states have reduced fees after recent legal challenges.

In February, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with petitioners challenging the legality of fees at Mount Lemmon in Arizona.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act allows the fees in "high-impact" recreation areas. But the lawsuit said the Forest Service went too far by charging those who just parked their cars to picnic, hike or camp in undeveloped areas.
Attorney Matt Kenna, representing the petitioners, said lawyers are working on a settlement, which likely will be completed in a few months.

But what will happen in other areas is unclear.

In Colorado, the Forest Service this summer agreed to charge only those who use a few improved parking areas and interpretive sites at Mount Evans. The decision settled a lawsuit arguing that visitors accessing the forest without using amenities shouldn't be charged.

"As far as California goes and the Adventure Pass ... we're hoping the Forest Service changes what it's doing," Kenna said.

Alasdair Coyne, conservation director of the Keep Sespe Wild environmental group, also wants to see changes happen soon. The Ojai resident opposes the fees, saying the public already pays taxes to support public lands.

He hikes, fishes and has volunteered at Los Padres but does not use the amenities, he said. While he parks his car in areas where the fee is required, he has never paid it, he said.

Los Padres spokesman Andrew Madsen said he hears few complaints about the passes at the local headquarters.

Some people wish they didn't have to pay it, he said, but regular users also notice the improvements supported by such fees, such as new toilets or picnic benches.

In addition, surveys show about two-thirds of Los Padres visitors don't plan to park their cars, Madsen said.

"The greatest number of our visitors ... say their primary objective of coming to the forest is driving for pleasure," he said.

Kurt Preissler, a hiking leader with the Ventura branch of the Sierra Club, buys an annual combination pass that allows him to visit forests and national parks for $80.

"It's kind of a balance situation here. I don't know what's right, what's wrong. But not everything is for free," Preissler said. "We somehow have to pay for it."

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