

## ‰ The Lesser of Evils

campers have long paid to use campgrounds, as have off-road motorists paid for their facilities (but not the damage they do to the land and water) through the tax on the gas they waste. Downhill skiers pay through a portion of their lift ticket.

Have you wondered why federal land agencies are so accommodating of late to off-road vehicle constituencies? As that great conservationist Deep Throat noted, “follow the money.” Several years ago, Congress allocated that portion of gas tax funds paid by off-highway gasoline consumption to the development of trails and staging facilities.

Bureaucrats do not have a similar source of funds to tap from a tax on hiking boots, cross-county skis, backpacks, binoculars, and related outdoor gear. Public agencies have long tapped such tax revenues on hunting and fishing equipment to the benefit of hunters and fishers.

Rec fee opponents will say...

*But, I am just walking on public lands, I am not using a developed facility like a campground!*

Trails are development and do cost money to build and maintain. There is also the cost of law enforcement to reduce the risk of your car getting clouted at the trailhead.

*But dammit, the public lands belong to all of us and ought to be free to use!* You are not paying to use the public lands; you are paying for use of the developed facilities on public lands. If you do not want to pay, then the next time you visit the national forests, park more than one-quarter mile from the trailhead and do not use any trails. When you come to a trail while walking through the woods, jump over it.

*But the poor cannot afford it!* True, but if you subscribe to this journal, you can. If you were truly concerned about the poor, they would be better served if you were advocating progressive taxation, income redistribution, or at least a “trail stamps” equivalent to the food stamps program.

*But we pay taxes and it ought to go to trails on public lands that are available to everyone!* While available to all, not all use them. With a specific fee, you know exactly what you are paying for; with a general tax, you do not.

*But the bureaucracy is using most of the money on overhead!* Agreed. But that’s a reason to reform—not abolish—the fee system.

*But the system is confusing—with different fees and different*

*permits for different places!* The bureaucracy is slowing improving the trail fee system to make it more user friendly. With pressure, they will eventually get it right.

AS A CONSERVATIONIST, you should be more concerned. The perverted elegance of the federal timber sale program is that up to two-thirds of all timber revenues are kicked back directly to the bureaucrats who put up the sales. Bureaucrats are rewarded—in terms of bigger budgets, more staff, nicer offices, newer trucks—for making stumps. While not as elegant or efficient, the same can be said for the federal livestock grazing program.

Is it a good idea to move the Forest Service budget from one addiction to another? As timber revenues decline, would not the Forest Service seek to supplant them with recreation revenues? And not just the paltry trail fee, but bigger cuts off bigger campgrounds and ski areas? Quite likely they will try; they are bureaucrats after all.

As conservationists, we have gotten ourselves in a political trap; we have whined for years about taxpayer-subsidized logging, grazing, and mining and called for an end to such giveaways. Taking such a position rather assumes that it is okay to do these

things on the public lands if they are not subsidized and/or that all (ab)users of public lands ought to pay their way. Are conservationists now going to openly support taxpayer subsidies of human-powered recreation, but continue to oppose them for logging, grazing, mining, and off-road vehicles?

As the Forest Service switches from the timber tit to the amusement mammary, conservationists must now work to prevent the agency from going for ski areas, water slides, full-service resorts, and hotels. It is a serious problem, but a manageable one and not nearly the problem that massive timber sales, grazing permits, and mining projects are.

Paying a user fee need not be the beginning of an irrevocable slide down the slippery slope to industrial recreation, especially if conservationists tenaciously oppose the Disneyfication of public lands. The price of wilderness—like liberty—is eternal vigilance. So as a recreationist, pay your fee and quit whining! If you are a conservationist, pay your trail fee and never quit watching the agency. ☹

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# Federal Recreation Fees

## The Lesser of Evils

by Andy Kerr

SO, YOU DO NOT LIKE to pay a fee to hike on public lands? Who does—besides bureaucrats, so-called free-market libertarians, and those members of Congress who would like to tap the Forest Service budget to find money for another cruise missile or inch of flight deck on the next aircraft carrier?

Though tax revenues have gone up, domestic government spending has gone down. Overall, the Forest Service gets less tax dollars than it used to—and that is generally a good thing because the agency spends most of it subsidizing roads, timber sales, livestock grazing, and mining. In the horrible old days (today they are just terrible), when a million log trucks a year were coming off Pacific Northwest federal forests (it is today perhaps 100,000 year, or one every five minutes, all day, every day of the year), trail maintenance, campground, and other recreation costs were taken out of general funds—sort of as small mitigation for all those stumps.

If you are opposed to national forest recreation fees, first ask yourself: Are you opposed as a *recreationist* or as a *conservationist*? It makes a difference as to any potential high ground you might occupy on the issue.

AS A RECREATIONIST, you were happy with the free ride of not paying for trails, just like the free ride other recreationists get. But, oh wait,

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## National *Forests* or Amusement Parks?

by Bethanie Walder

LATE LAST OCTOBER, I drove my car to the entrance gate at Yellowstone National Park and paid the \$20 entrance fee so I could speak at a conservation conference being held in the park. Even though I live just a five-hour drive from one of the most beautiful places in North America, I almost never go to Yellowstone anymore—for two reasons. First, it costs 20 bucks to get in whether I plan to spend a day or a week there. Second, it's teeming with snowmobiles in the winter. Not exactly the kind of outdoor experience I'm looking for. But it seems we'd better get ready for the brave new world of public lands recreation because the Forest Service's recreation fee demonstration program is primed to make the national forests just as expensive and commercially developed as many of our national parks.

Initially implemented by Congress in 1996, "fee demo" was touted as a way to raise the site-specific funds to fix the crumbling recreation infrastructure in the national forests. But why was it crumbling? Because Congress had systematically cut direct recreation appropriations to the agency, even while the economy was booming. Fee demo is a pre-determined solution to a manufactured crisis, a solution that ultimately benefits private industry at the expense of public lands. The Forest Service has long maintained a close relationship with the timber industry. With reduced logging levels, that relationship has cooled, and the agency has jumped into bed with the recreation industry. It is looking for new revenue sources and finding them in industrial recreation and commercial partnerships. But rec fees are primed to take the Forest Service down the wrong ecological and economic path.

### More fees, more infrastructure, more damage

The Forest Service is likely to promote those forms of recreation that justify the highest user fees. From trail widening to high-end campgrounds, recreation fees encourage high-intensity uses that in turn create high-intensity infrastructures. To date, limited recreation funding has been used to mitigate or restore the ecological damage caused by recreation; instead, it is used to increase recreational developments.

It is no surprise that intensive recreational use and its attendant infrastructure fragment habitat; harass and displace wildlife; increase noise, water, and air pollution; spread invasive weeds; and compact and erode soil. Compounding these problems, high-intensity recreation displaces "human-powered" activities, forcing hikers and wildlife watchers into smaller and smaller areas (mostly roadless and wilderness areas), because motorized uses tend to be incompatible with low-intensity uses. Tried taking a quiet cross-country ski trip in Yellowstone lately?

As both wild animals and human-powered recreationists are displaced into smaller areas, the impacts of quiet recreation become more significant on wildlife, because neither group has anywhere left to go. While all recreational decisions should be based on maintaining the ecological vitality and resiliency of the land, recreation fees force the agency to manage for short-term revenues. Yet nowhere is revenue generation listed as one of the agency's mandates.

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