

Federal Recreation Fees: The Lesser of Two Evils

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by Andy Kerr

The Forest Service and the National Park Service are due to announce a new single, Pacific Northwest-wide recreation pass. National parks have longed charged an entrance fee and most national forests now charge trail user fees. The Forest Service calls it a "fee demonstration project" (to demonstrate that you will pay the fee). The pass will be required to park at most national forest trailheads and in other specified high-use areas. Campground fees will continue to be collected separately.

It is essentially the same concept as the Oregon "Sno-Park" permits for winter recreationists, for which you must display a pass on your dash to park your car in the snow zone. For "Sno-Park" passes, the moneys collected are used to plow parking areas. Currently 80 percent of the revenues are retained on each national forest for trail maintenance, etc.

So, you do not like fees? Who does besides bureaucrats, so-called free-market libertarians and members of Congress who would like to tap the Forest Service budget to get some more money for another cruise missile or an inch of flight deck of the next aircraft carrier?

Though tax revenues have gone up, government spending has gone down, and this includes the Forest Service. Overall, the agency gets less tax dollars—and it is a very good thing because they spend 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 the federal forests of Oregon and Washington (it is today perhaps 200,000 year, or one every two and one-half 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 if 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 (though many trees paid for it with their lives). But, oh wait, campers have long paid to use campgrounds, as have off-road vehiclists paid (for the facilities to support them, but not the damage they do to the environment) for their facilities through the tax on the gas they waste. Downhill skiers pay through a portion of their lift ticket.

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 then do not use any trails. When you come a trail walking through the woods, jump over it.

But the poor cannot afford it! True, but if you bought this newspaper, you can. If you were truly concerned about the poor, they would be better served if you were talking progressive taxation, income redistribution, or at least a trail 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.

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 to get 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, having whined for years about taxpayer-subsidized logging, grazing and mining and called for an end to such give-aways. 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-power recreation, but continue to oppose them for logging, grazing and 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.

(For another view of user fees as the first step on the inevitable slippery slope toward the Disneyfication of the public lands, see www.WildWilderness.org.)

Paying a user fee need not be the beginning of an irrevocable slide down the slippery slope to industrial recreation. 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.