

# WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

P.O. Box 135, Durango, CO 81302

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Erica Walz, Escalante, UT  
435/826-4579

Kitty Benzar, WSNFC  
970/259-4616

## **BLM Plan For User Fees On Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Meets Local Opposition** *City of Escalante Moves to Condemn Fee Scheme*

NORWOOD, CO — A proposal by the Bureau of Land Management to impose user fees for visitors to Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument has some residents of southern Utah steamed.

BLM managers are considering charging a fee under the Fee Demo program for car camping and overnight backpacking throughout the 1.9 million acre National Monument. Residents of nearby Escalante have tried to head off the fees by asking their city council to pass a resolution opposing them. The resolution passed unanimously on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and planning is underway to ask for resolutions from additional towns and surrounding county governments.

The Escalante resolution notes that local residents subsidize the operation of the monument by volunteering for search and rescue, ambulance, fire protection and law enforcement services. It goes on to say that “User fees would impose a disproportionate cost to local citizens in light of the contributions and sacrifices they already make.” The resolution also says “While these fees may initially be limited in scope, they will inevitably be increased and expanded throughout the monument as a further means of restricting use of these public lands.”

The City Council also called for an end of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo), under which the fees would be authorized. Fee Demo, originally a two-year test program, is now in its eighth year. It was supposed to test Americans’ willingness to “pay to play” for recreational activities historically funded by congressional appropriations. Opponents charge Fee Demo with being a form of double taxation, and with reducing accountability by land managers. They also point out that the demonstration is not a true test of support, since failure to pay results in a criminal citation.

In December, 2003, Monument Manager Dave Hunsaker wrote that “Public input will be sought prior to the design and implementation of any fee system.” Despite that, Visitor

Services Manager Barbara Sharrow has reportedly vowed to have a fee program in place before she leaves in April for a new posting in Montrose, Colorado.

“Monument managers have appointed a citizens advisory committee and promised that it will have input on any fee decision,” said Escalante resident and fee opponent Erica Walz. “But the first committee meeting is not until April 19<sup>th</sup>, and it sounds like the fees will already be in place before then. This is a very controversial topic and deserves a full public input process. It shouldn’t be forced down our throats.”

In Colorado, the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition hailed the Escalante resolution as a milestone in the effort to end Fee Demo. “With this resolution, we welcome Utah to the growing list of states with residents who are actively working to keep the ‘public’ in public lands,” said WSNFC spokesperson Kitty Benzar. “Four state legislatures and dozens of town and county governments are on record opposing Fee Demo. We are optimistic that Congress will hear the voice of the people and end this misguided program soon.”

The WSNFC is a broad-based group with members in 35 states that is working to end the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) in the Forest Service, BLM, and Fish & Wildlife Service. The Coalition assists local residents to obtain anti-Fee Demo resolutions from their elected officials as one way to encourage Congress to terminate the program.

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