

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

OPPOSITION TO FEE DEMO GROWS IN UTAH, COLORADO House Bill Creating Permanent Public Lands Fees Would Have Negative Impact on Local Business and Tourism

Citing double taxation and negative effects on tourism among other reasons, Montrose County, Colorado and the Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments have each taken a strong stand against the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo). Both bodies recently passed resolutions calling for Fee Demo to be abolished and opposing House Bill HR3283, which would implement permanent access fees on all public lands.

The Utah association represents four counties (Carbon, Emery, Grand, and San Juan) and numerous municipal governments, including Moab, Monticello, Price, and Castle Dale. Their Executive Board voted in Price on September 8th to adopt a resolution that states in part, "The Recreational Fee Demonstration Program encourages federal land managers to view that resource which has been placed under their stewardship as a quasi-private enterprise to be operated for return on investment which, in turn, redounds to personal benefit through job security in a manner appropriate in the private sector but inappropriate in the realm of public servants."

In reference to HR3283, the resolution states that, if enacted, it would "grant broad discretion to federal land management agencies to extend recreational fees to public and forest lands generally thereby authorizing the 'criminalization' of those activities and that simple access which have been exercised by the general public since the beginning of the Republic."

In Colorado, the Montrose County Board of Commissioners was equally vehement in their resolution, stating flatly that "the extension of the Recreational Fee Demonstration

Program and/or HR3283 would have a negative impact on local business and tourism.” Their resolution passed unanimously at a public meeting in Montrose on September 20th.

The House bill, sponsored by Rep. Ralph Regula (R-OH), recently passed the House Resources Committee by a voice vote and has been referred to the floor. If enacted, it would implement a national multi-agency pass called the America the Beautiful Pass, with an estimated initial price of \$85 annually. The Pass would be required for recreational access to public lands managed by the Forest Service, BLM, Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Reclamation.

Failure to purchase and display the Pass would be a criminal offense. First offenses would be punishable by a \$100 fine, while subsequent offenses would be Misdemeanors punishable by up to \$5,000 and/or 6 months in jail. The owner of a vehicle not displaying the pass would be liable for the penalty even if a friend or family member was using it.

The recent resolutions join dozens of similar statements by elected bodies nationally. In Colorado, fourteen towns and counties, as well as the state legislature, are on record against Fee Demo, as are numerous jurisdictions in California, Arizona, and the Pacific Northwest. State legislatures officially opposed to Fee Demo are Colorado, Oregon, California, and New Hampshire.

Fee Demo is a controversial program that was authorized in 1996 as a two-year demonstration allowing the land management agencies to charge for access and use of public lands that were previously free. It has since been extended five times and is currently due to expire on December 31, 2005.

“HR 3283 is an outrage and an insult to the American public that owns these lands and has paid taxes to maintain them through two World Wars and the Great Depression,” said Robert Funkhouser, President of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. “Allowing the land management agencies to appropriate their own funds without congressional oversight puts an unfair burden on the American taxpayer. It is a double tax.

“The agencies’ own research has determined that the program discriminates against lower income and working Americans, and the General Accounting Office has determined that it is costing over 50% of the fee revenue just to collect the fees and administer the program,” added Funkhouser.

“Congressman Regula, with Administration support, is trying to push this down America’s throat. It is a sad day when someone so hostile to rural and western values can rise to such a position of power in Washington that he actually might be able to make this happen.”

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition is a broad-based group consisting of motorized and non-motorized recreational interests, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, elected officials and just plain citizens. It has members and supporting organizations in 35 states and the military, and has worked for over three years to end Fee Demo. The WSNFC encourages more oversight and accountability in the land management agencies, and encourages Congress to fund public lands adequately through the regular appropriations process.

HR 3283 can be read online at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:HR3283>: