

WESTERN SLOPE NO-FEE COALITION

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FOREST SERVICE GUIDELINES REVEAL PLANS FOR ILLEGAL FEE SITES

Unprofitable Recreation Sites Nationwide To Be Closed

The U.S. Forest Service has issued Interim Implementation Guidelines to local forest managers instructing them on how to implement the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), better known as the Recreational Access Tax (RAT). These guidelines purport to guide managers in following congressional intent as they transition from the previous Fee Demo program to the new law.

Instead, they do just the opposite. They instruct local managers on how to *bypass* congressional constraints and *illegally* charge fees for dispersed areas, general access, and recreational use of undeveloped land. The guidelines are written so as to modify existing fee programs as little as possible, while extending new fees to millions more acres of public land. Fees will be charged for whole or nearly whole National Forests in California and Arizona as well as vast tracks of forests in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, New Hampshire, and other states. Fees will be charged for trailheads, OHV routes, mountain biking trails, equestrian trails, and wilderness areas. All of this is in clear contradiction to congressional intent and to the letter of the law.

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition has released an analysis of the Forest Service guidelines. It charges that the Forest Service is inventing two categories of fees that are not authorized in the law: High Impact Area Fees and Recreation Permit Fees. These categories are being used to bypass the restrictions in the law that forbid the agency from charging entrance fees for National Forests or for "dispersed areas with low or no investment." The restrictions were meant by Congress to rein in the agencies from having broad, unlimited fee authority.

At the same time, the Forest Service has undertaken a nationwide review of all recreation sites under their management. Those that cannot achieve "financial sustainability" will be slated for closure.

This program, Recreation Site Facility Master Planning (RS-FMP) calls for Regional and Forest managers to identify all the sites in their jurisdiction that do not meet standards for sustainability and mark those less profitable for closure. And, in a concept borrowed

straight from Madison Avenue, each Forest must identify its marketing "niche" and consider closing any sites that do not fit that niche. The process is already underway and will be completed by 2007. The scale of closures on National Forests appears to be vast with campgrounds, access points, visitor centers and trailheads reportedly on the block.

The relationship of the RS-FMP to the fee program is clear. The agency will be denying access to more and more of the National Forest system outside of fee areas. Even fee areas will be closed if they are not sufficiently profitable or don't fit the marketing niche. RS-FMP documents state that "Recreation fee authority has created higher visitor expectations," resulting in a ratcheting-up effect of higher fees chasing higher expectations. By allowing a public agency to tax the public directly, Congress has changed the incentive of forest managers from land stewardship to revenue generation.

Congressional funding of recreation budget line items has not kept up with inflation, but these operations and maintenance budgets have not been heavily slashed either. The biggest obstacle to the maintenance of Forest Service areas is the systematic de-funding of operations and maintenance by the agency themselves. While appropriations from Congress go up, generally 1% or 2 % annually, funding from the Washington Office and the Regions to the Forest and District levels has been dropping by double-digit percentages every year. Some Forests report drops as high as 20% last year.

So where are the funds going? Indications are that money is being pulled from recreation and maintenance budgets and used for weed programs, relocating staff and for fire-fuel reduction. Some managers claim that the cost of administration has risen. Whatever the reason, the bottom line is that the Forest Service's priority is not the public's use of their public land.

Closing recreation sites and trails will cause enormous harm to local economies. Before limiting public use, an outside audit of all related budget line items should be conducted to find out where the money has gone. Past audits of the Forest Service by the Government Accountability Office have revealed widespread financial mismanagement that has never been corrected.

Copies of the agency's Implementation Guidelines and the WSNFC analysis of them can be obtained from www.WesternSlopeNoFee.org. Information about the RS-FMP process is available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/measures/Prioritize/RS-FMP.htm>.