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## **Baucus Berates Recreation Fee Policy**

**By Bill Schneider**

U.S. Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) is no fan of recreation fees. Or the Federal Lands Recreation Act (FLREA), often called the Recreation Access Tax or RAT by fee opponents.

FLREA or RAT, depending on whether you collect or pay the fees, was tacked on a must-pass spending bill in December 2004, creating the authority agencies now use to aggressively increase the number of fee-based recreation sites and to substantial increase in existing fees.

But unlike many other politicians who oppose the recreation fees as a method for funding federal agencies, Baucus is seriously considering doing something about it. Something like, repealing it.

Max and I go way back, to the early 1980s, when he was in my Governor's Cup Marathon Clinic and probably ran fastest marathon ever, 3:01:18, by any sitting U.S. Senator. One of the fastest, no doubt.

So, when his press manager, Barrett Kaiser, set me up to have coffee with Max earlier today, he warned me that his boss only had 30 minutes. Translate: use it wisely. Nonetheless, we had to talk about running, and how bummed I was that he outlasted me. Max still wants to do a hundred-miler, and I'm so lame I can't run around the block. Where's the fairness in that?

Anyway, back to business. Only 15 minutes left!

"It's all wrong," Max answers when asked about escalating recreation fees on federal lands. "These are public lands, and public lands are for the public. People pay for them with their taxes. They shouldn't have to pay for them twice."

His family holdings are intermingled with public lands north of Helena, and he also talked about how close proximity to public lands increase private property values.

"Public lands are what distinguishes Montana from other states and other countries," Baucus said, "Fees shouldn't be used to keep people off their lands. I've already expressed my concern about these fees to Gail Kimball (new chief of the Forest Service).

"Fees are the cousin of privatization," Baucus believes. "I sort of view us (members as Congress) as the hired hands who take care of public lands for the people who own them."

Critics of RAT has long believed that the incremental process of “demonstrating” recreation sites (i.e. start charging fees), increasing existing fees, and turning over some sites to private operators, who will charge fees, is gradually privatizing and commercializing the public lands. The Bush administration has strongly pushed fee-charging policies, seeking what has been termed “full cost recovery.”

The end result, critics claim, is national parks and forest becoming steadily less accessible and affordable to lower and middle income Americans.

So what to do about it? With only two or three minutes left, I asked Max that question and was surprised by his answer.

“I’m considering introducing legislation to repeal it (FLREA),” he said.

Short pause.

“Seriously considering it, I should say.”

Another pause.

“In fact, I’ll probably do it.”

At that point, he turned to his staff and asked how this might be done, and we had a short discussion of introducing a bill to repeal FLREA and seeing what would happen and speculating that amendments could be offered by opponents to change the emphasis of the law.

Which should be, according to Baucus, allowing fees for real services like staying in a developed campground, but disallowing most other fees.

I didn’t say this, but I was thinking Max would be the perfect ball carrier for such legislation. With the recent democratic takeover of Congress, the senior senator from Montana now holds the powerful position of chair of the Senate Finance Committee, has long tenure in the Senate, and hails from one of the key public lands states in the West.

“If I decide to do it,” he said as our time ran out and his press people wanted him to move on, “You’ll be the first to know.”