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**Front Page**

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## **Recreation Fees Rising in Wake of Fires' Costs**

**By Jim Robbins**

HAMILTON, Mont. — Reeling from the high cost of fighting wildfires, federal land agencies have been imposing new fees and increasing existing ones at recreation sites across the West in an effort to raise tens of millions of dollars.

Additionally, hundreds of marginally profitable campsites and other public facilities on federal lands have been closed, and thousands more like overlooks and picnic tables are being considered for removal.

“As fire costs increase, I’ve got less and less money for other programs,” said Dave Bull, superintendent of the Bitterroot National Forest here in Hamilton. The charge for access to Lake Como, a popular boating destination in the national forest, will be increased this year, to \$5 from \$2.

Last year, the Forest Service collected \$60 million in fees nationwide, nearly double the \$32 million in 2000. The Bureau of Land Management, the country’s biggest landlord, also doubled its revenues over the same period, to more than \$14 million from \$7 million. The agency projects revenues from the fees will grow an additional \$1 million this year.

Though the new and increased fees still account for a small part of the agencies’ overall budgets, they have riled elected officials and environmental and recreation groups across the West. The critics complain that there has been insufficient public involvement in the changes — imposed at hundreds of locations over the past three years or so — and suggest that they reflect a significant shift in federal policy to a market-based approach from one of managing sites for public benefit.

Unlike the National Park Service, which has routinely charged admission and other fees at its parks, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other federal agencies have historically been less aggressive in imposing such assessments.

“Our government wants to charge us \$5 or \$10 to go for a walk in the woods — our woods,” said Kitty Benzar of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, in Durango, Colo. “We don’t think it’s right.”

Senator Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana, has introduced a bill that would repeal the authority of the Forest Service and other agencies to raise or institute many of the fees.

“The authority given land managers is being abused,” Mr. Baucus said. “They are using it to pad their budgets at the expense of the public. I think it’s just wrong.”

Federal officials say the fees are unavoidable because Congress has not increased financing for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management even as the cost of fighting fires on public lands has consumed more of their budgets. The United States has more than 630 million acres of public land, most of it in the West.

“Firefighting costs went from 20 percent of the overall agency budget to 47 percent,” said Mr. Bull, comparing the current Forest Service budget with those in the mid-1990s. Last year, the agency spent \$1.4 billion on fighting fires.

The nearly \$47,000 raised in fees last year at Lake Como went to pay for an employee to direct traffic, to add a lane for boaters entering the lake and more frequent pumping of outhouses, activities that could not have been done because of money diverted to firefighting. Forest Service officials here say the fees are warranted because of the improvements.

“These fees are really important,” said Joni Packard, who is in charge of recreational fees for the Forest Service in the region that includes Montana, Idaho, Washington, North Dakota and South Dakota. “They keep our program whole.”

But Mr. Baucus called the fees “double taxation” because federal income taxes support public lands. He said he was not opposed to charging for access to developed areas like campgrounds, but not for trails and other

undeveloped areas. His bill, introduced in December, is in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and has the backing of several Western senators, including Michael D. Crapo, Republican of Idaho.

The Umatilla National Forest in Oregon is typical of the new approach at undeveloped or minimally developed locations. Umatilla officials recently proposed 39 new fees, including a \$5-a-day charge to use 17 trailheads, most into wilderness areas that are now free. Violators would be subject to tickets and up to \$75 fines for the first offense.

Most controversial have been the Forest Service fees for access to large wilderness areas or forests near newly improved areas like parking lots. One of those is along a 14-mile stretch of state highway near Denver that borders the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and tops out on Mount Evans at a scenic overlook.

“If people stop their car to take a picture of a mountain goat, rangers can force them to pay a \$10 fee,” Ms. Benzar said.

Minimal user fees were allowed in developed areas of public lands under the Land and Water Conservation Act, passed in the 1960s. In 1996, the Recreation Fee Demonstration Act expanded the types of fees that could be charged, and the 2004 Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act allowed even more.

The 1996 and 2004 acts were passed as riders to larger spending bills, leading critics to complain that they were given insufficient public scrutiny. Most of the objectionable fees have been imposed since 2005, when the 2004 law went into effect.

“The public has never had a chance to make themselves heard on this issue, which is a fundamental change to their system of public lands,” Ms. Benzar said.

The Baucus bill would eliminate all fees being charged under the authority of the 1996 and 2004 laws.

Mr. Baucus proposes to address firefighting problems with separate legislation that would provide \$600 million for the Forest Service and \$200 million for the Bureau of Land Management. That money would

cover about 80 percent of the two agencies' firefighting costs that exceed their appropriated budgets.

Because the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management keep within their budgets money generated by the new fees, critics suggest that they have an incentive to raise as much as they can.

"In some cases, they put out a trash can and picnic table and other things just to meet the minimum so they can charge \$5," said Scott Silver, the head of Wild Wilderness, a group in Bend, Ore., that opposes the fees.

That is contrary to the Western way of life, Mr. Baucus said, adding:

"We're an outdoor people. The land defines us. It's part of a certain sense of freedom in the West."

Holly Fretwell, a research associate at the Property and Environment Research Center, a free-market research organization in Bozeman, said the fees were the best way to pay for recreation because they made the federal agencies more responsive to the people who use the sites. With fees, Ms. Fretwell said, the agencies "need to provide the service people want or they won't use them."