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Higher Admission, Hiker Fees Start on National Lands

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Ever think that a walk in a national forest would require a user fee? Well, that day is here thanks to a rider tacked onto an appropriations bill by Senator Frank Murkowski (R-AK). Since the fees are slated to provide funds for trail maintenance and other user facilities one might suspect Senator Murkowski of being a strong environmental advocate, but his zero rating by the League of Conservation Voters suggests otherwise. Perhaps there's more behind the Senator's action than simply a desire to upgrade forest facilities for hikers. So let's examine how the Forest Service has come to charge individuals for a benefit that for nearly the past century has been funded out of general revenues.

When Republicans gained control of the US Congress in 1994 some among their ranks began an attack on our public lands. Utah's James Hansen (R-UT) proposed closing some national parks, including Nevada's Great Basin National Park. He also advocated transferring all 272 million acres of Bureau of Land Management holdings to the states in which they lie. Such actions no doubt would be followed by the states selling off these lands to the mining, cattle and timber industries.

Budgets for national forests, national parks and many environmental programs also have been disproportionately slashed, purportedly in the name of deficit reduction. A decade ago these programs received 2.4% of annual federal spending; in 1996 they were down to about 1.4%, all told a 41% decrease. Has the military budget or many corporate subsidies been subjected to cuts of this magnitude? I think not.

As a result of these budget reductions the National Park Service has accumulated a \$5.6 billion deficit for construction and maintenance, \$2 billion for protection of resources, and \$1.5 billion for land acquisition. The Forest Service, also subjected to budget cutbacks, has closed recreation facilities and in many places eliminated trail maintenance.

In response to this "fiscal crisis" in the national parks and other public lands, park admissions this year were markedly increased (also as part of Senator Murkowski's rider) and the trail fee program initiated on national forests. Consider though, that if deficit reduction was the primary motivation for slashing these budgets, why weren't the numerous commercial users of public lands, from motion picture companies to park concessionaires, also asked to pay higher fees? The likely answer can be found in Forest Service brochures explaining the trail fee program: "The Forest Service's recreation fee demonstration program was developed in partnership with leading national recreation interests. Its implementation is occurring through a Challenge Cost Share partnership with the American

Recreation Coalition (ARC). ARC's efforts will include explanation of the fee program to the recreation industry and recreation enthusiasts, as well as assistance in evaluation of the demonstration projects."

The ARC, by the way, is a consortium of approximately 120 organizations. Among its members are dozens of motor boat, jet-ski, RV, motorcycle, ORV and snowmobile manufacturers and associations. The remaining members represent a diverse range of interests including ski area associations, public lands concessionaires, campground associations, tour associations, petroleum companies, the NRA and the Walt Disney company. Not one hiking, backpacking or environmental organization is an ARC member! And the close ties between the Forest Service and the ARC don't stop with the latter's role in the trail fee program. Recently a former ARC chairman was appointed as chief of staff to the head of the Forest Service.

It is also curious that in contrast to the League of Conservation Voters' low opinion of Senator Murkowski's environmental voting record, the ARC recently honored him with its 1997 Sheldon Coleman Great Outdoors Award.

The foregoing evidence suggests to this writer that the trail fee program is but one step toward increasing the privatization and commercialization of our public lands including opening more of them to motorized recreation.

Several regional environmental organizations have been tracking the trail fee issue. One of the best informed is Wild Wilderness, based in Bend, Oregon, whose web site contains a wealth of information about the ARC and its involvement with the US government.

The future management of our public lands should be decided through public debate and thoughtfully crafted legislation, not by obscure riders attached to appropriations bills. At the heart of the matter is the question whether our national parks and other public lands should be managed to conserve their natural and historic resources or to be self-financing economic engines dependent on motorized recreation. Our elected representatives have already heard what the ARC wants, now they need to hear from their constituents.