

A New Wilderness User Fee

I have followed plans by the Forest Service to limit public access to three of Oregon's most popular wilderness areas for years. The Cascade Wilderness Strategies Project is intended to protect the wilderness from overuse by controlling public access.

The public comment process for this proposal has stretched over three years and for me involved attending four meetings and submitting four lengthy comment letters. Over the years, many comments have been submitted; few supporting the implementation of a fee-based, limited-entry, permit system that will keep many of us out of our local wilderness areas.

The process has left me frustrated and wanting to lash out and vent my feelings. However, I live in Sisters. I have read too many letters and Commentary's in the Nugget from unhappy, antagonistic, mean-spirited, people willing to attack their neighbors, stretch the facts—or make up their own. These people have taught me something valuable. I don't want to be like them. I am deeply frustrated but want to be civil, respectful and as factual as possible.

My frustration comes from a process that sucks up huge amounts of time and leads one to believe that their opinion truly matters. Realistically, one should know better. You know it isn't a vote; you know that Agency is required to collect comments but not required to act on those comments. You know sometimes this can even be a good thing. Nevertheless, it is frustrating.

The Forest Service recently released a memo detailing changes prompted by public comment. There are only three. One changes of the end of the permit season by a few days; from the end of September to the last Friday in September. Another adds 11 trailheads to the list of those not requiring permits. (But still requiring a Wilderness Stewardship Fee.) Lastly, a pass restricting travel between one wilderness and another, has been dropped.

That's it. That's all that came out of the time effort and energy from the dozens and dozens of dedicated people who followed the process from day one.

The Forest Service has steadfastly refused to discuss the budget for this project or address its financial impacts on users. They say any discussion of fees can take place only after the program is implemented. What? Why? Frankly, it seems the Agency is being less than forthcoming in refusing to openly address the financial impacts of this project.

The document recently released does little to dispel my frustration at this lack of openness. It references a Wilderness Stewardship Fee. This seems to indicate users will be charged two fees; a permit application fee and the newly announced Wilderness Stewardship Fee. Why? Perhaps because this second fee will assure that day hikers, hiking on trails that do not require a permit, pay for their hike as well.

Wilderness Stewardship Fee. It has a nice ring but I am afraid the Cascade Wilderness Strategies Project is more about fees than stewardship. Perhaps I am wrong. I would like to be. I would like to imagine the agency is deeply and truly concerned about and protecting wilderness values but past actions give rise to bothersome questions.

Why did an Agency concerned about protecting wilderness values push to alter natural ecosystems in the Mount Washington Wilderness by using helicopters to set fires? Why do staff allow non-native fish to be stocked in wilderness lakes to compete with endemic populations? Why does an Agency promoting a pack-it-in, pack-it-out ethos, leave the trash from burned-out lookouts dotting the wilderness? Why do staff allow snowmobiles to destroy the solitude of a skier's wilderness experience?

Perhaps it simply a problem typical of any huge organization—government or otherwise. Too big. Not very nimble. Rarely open to creative thought. More, like any organization with thousands of employees, a ponderous giant; slow to evolve but friendly and doing the best it can. I understand that. I appreciate the challenges. But, I am still really frustrated!

Arthur Pope

Director

Wilderness Report

art@wildernessreport.org