

How Much Will Your Next Hike Cost?

I just received my Oregon property tax statement. It is an interesting document that provides a breakdown of where your tax money will be spent over the next year. If you're like me you might not agree with all of it but every item appeared on a ballot at one time or another and was approved by voters. Now consider the new wilderness access fees proposed by the Willamette and Deschutes National Forests. In this case Congress passed legislation allowing Federal agencies the freedom to set and collect user fees, without further oversight.

The Northwest Forest Pass is a product of this legislation—for \$30 annually you have access to specific recreation sites. In 2018 the Northwest Forest Pass generated almost one and a half million dollars for the Deschutes National Forest. When I learned that three hundred thousand dollars was used to reroof a visitor center I requested additional detail on how these funds were used. In response, I was directed to submit my request under the Freedom of Information Act—at best a time consuming and potentially expensive process.

The Deschutes expects the new wilderness fees to generate roughly two hundred thousand dollars a year. My request to review a budget detailing how the Agency plans to use these funds has as yet received no response. However, I was told the top priority would be doubling the number of Wilderness Rangers followed by adding weekend staffing to visitor centers and district offices. Funding trail crews was not mentioned as a priority. Unfortunately, this focus on visitor management, rather than resource management, fails to address the severely degraded condition of most wilderness trails.

In trying to better understand this movement toward the collection of fees to use our public lands I attended two public meetings and talked to five Forest employees. (I also sent two emails and left four messages with Forest Service staff—so far, I have received no response.) Here is what I found.

- Under the current proposal users will pay three dollars per person for a day hike and five dollars per night for overnight trips. A four-day hike for a family of four that used to be free will now cost \$86. Fees were set based upon what Agency staff felt seemed reasonable. Impacts on minority populations and low-income families were not studied.
- All permits must be issued on-line by recreation.gov. This federal contract with a private company is valued at 186 million dollars over ten years. Users will pay wilderness.gov one dollar per for day hikes and five dollars per party for overnight trips. None of this money helps support wilderness.
- If you have a wilderness permit you will not need a Northwest Forest Pass. If you hike at a trailhead that does not require a permit, you will still need to buy the \$30 Northwest Forest Pass.
- Hunters will not need a permit or have to pay fees. Why? The Agency explanation is that hunters have already paid for an Oregon hunting license. Why this should be a consideration is unclear since no portion of state license fees help the Forest Service address wilderness use issues.
- Locally, the Forest Service has chosen not to address the thorny issue of equestrian impacts on wilderness either in the quota system or the fee system. With their weight and steel shoes horses have huge impacts on trails and campsites prompting many wilderness areas to implement policies to mitigate these impacts. Why local managers have chosen not to follow this lead is unclear.
- Managers are unable to assure that appropriated funds currently dedicated to wilderness will not to be reduced and replaced by fee revenue. They are also unable to assure that use of these fees will be more transparent than expenditures of Northwest Forest Pass revenues.

Consider this. If this fee appeared on your local ballot as a bond measure would you vote for it? Love it or hate it. You have until November 25th to let the Forest Service know how you feel. More information about proposed fees is available at www.fs.usda.gov/willamette. Comments can be sent to WillametteRecFeeComments@usda.gov.