

Wilderness Fees

The Deschutes and Willamette National Forests have recently released their proposal to charge the public to use three of Oregon's most popular wilderness areas. Next year you will have to apply for a permit to hike or camp in the Three Sisters, Mount Jefferson and Mount Washington wilderness areas.

The fee proposal is painfully brief. Youth under 12 will not be charged a fee but will need a permit. Day hikes will cost you a user fee of \$3 per day and overnight camping will cost you \$5 per day. In addition, rec.gov will charge you a service fee of \$1 per person for day hikes and \$6 per party for camping.

The proposal does not address how this money will be used or provide an analysis of how much money will be collected annually. It offers no discussion of how fee levels were determined or how much will be dedicated to administration. It fails to provide information on how our fees will be used or any assurance revenues will not be used to shift current congressionally dedicated funds to other programs or administrative overhead. Without this information any thoughtful assessment of this fee is nearly impossible.

How much will these fees cost the average wilderness user? The Forest Service proposal does not address this issue however, expect the fees you pay to be significant. Personally, I did six day hikes on the Deschutes National Forest last year. Under the new fee schedule the cost for two of us would be \$36 in user fees plus the rec.gov \$12 service fee. We also did four overnight trips totaling eight nights of camping. Cost for two, with the new fees; \$80 in user fees plus \$18 to rec.gov. The total, \$146 an annually. Add in the \$30 annual cost for a Northwest Forest Pass and you get a whopping \$1760 in fees over the next ten years!

User and service fees of this type are becoming increasingly common and act rather like tax assessed by a federal agency to backfill congressional budget reductions. If you travel, remember that other forests and National Parks also charge fees and many more are working to tap into this new source of revenue.

Whether this trend is good or bad depends on your perspective. Supporting management of our federal lands through user fees is rather like the difference between public and private schools. While we all support public schools through taxes should you prefer to attend a private school, your taxes will still support public schools and you will pay an additional fee to attend a private school. Likewise, everyone's taxes support Forest Service wilderness management nationwide however, if you want to hike in the Three Sisters Wilderness you now must pay additional fees to do so. Do you prefer many small fees, sort of like a sales tax, or one annual tax bill?

The Federal lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), first passed in 2005, defines criteria for the assessment of user fees.

(b) Basis for recreation fees

Recreation fees shall be established in a manner consistent with the following criteria:

- (1) The amount of the recreation fee shall be commensurate with the benefits and services provided to the visitor.
- (2) The Secretary shall consider the aggregate effect of recreation fees on recreation users and recreation service providers.
- (3) The Secretary shall consider comparable fees charged elsewhere and by other public agencies and by nearby private sector operators.

(4) The Secretary shall consider the public policy or management objectives served by the recreation fee.

(5) The Secretary shall obtain input from the appropriate Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, as provided in section 6803(d) of this title.

(6) The Secretary shall consider such other factors or criteria as determined appropriate by the Secretary.

At a minimum the Forest Service should publicly demonstrate compliance with these criteria before implementing any fee-based program.

The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act authorizing fee collection was recently extended until September 30, 2020.