

**Statement of
Mark Rey
Under Secretary
Natural Resources and Environment
United States Department of Agriculture**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

**On
Implementation of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program**

April 21, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss implementation of the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program by the Forest Service. The Department appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in how the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are implementing this vital program and want to work with Congress to develop permanent recreation fee authority which will provide quality services and facilities for the public to use.

The Recreational Fee Demonstration program (Fee Demo), first authorized by Congress in 1996, has given the Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management a great opportunity to test the notion of user-generated cost recovery, where fees are collected and expended onsite to provide enhanced services and facilities. Current authorization expires on December 31, 2005. A permanent fee program would allow the Forest Service, along with the Interior agencies, to make long-term investments, continue to build further on successes of the current demo program, improve efficiencies, and initiate more partnerships.

The recreation fee program is vital to our ability to provide quality recreational facilities, settings, and services. While the idea of charging fees for recreational use on our national forests has been controversial in some cases, taxpayers generally benefit when the cost of public services are at least partially borne by the direct users of these services. Since visitors to Federal lands receive some benefits that do not directly accrue to the public at large, charging a modest fee to partially offset the cost of that use is both fair and equitable. This principle underlies permanent fee authority under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (LWCF). Over the years, surveys conducted regarding recreation fees indicate that most people accept modest fees, especially when they know that the fees are returned to the site where they are collected to enhance their recreation experience.

My testimony today regarding the Fee Demo program will focus on: (1) implementation of the Forest Service Blueprint for Recreation Fees; (2) interagency coordination and consistency in developing recreation fee policies; (3) suggestions for permanent authority that would adhere to guiding principles and build on lessons learned; and (4) ideas for partnering with counties in implementing any permanent recreation fee authority.

Forest Service Blueprint for Recreation Fees

Over the past eight years all agencies involved in Fee Demo have experimented with fees and learned many lessons. Fee Demo was designed to allow flexibility in implementation and be broad enough to allow agencies to experiment with different types of fee programs. The Department continues to study, evaluate, and improve the fee program within individual agencies, sharing our learning experiences along the way. It has taken time to understand the results of these experiences, but the Forest Service is moving aggressively to address concerns that have arisen.

In January 2004, the Forest Service started implementing the Blueprint for Forest Service Recreation Fees (Blueprint). The Blueprint was developed based on lessons learned and

establishes consistent national criteria for how the recreation fee program will be implemented. The goal of the Blueprint is to have a consistent national policy to provide high quality recreation sites, services, and settings that enhance the visitor's experience and protect natural and cultural resources. By implementing the Blueprint, the Forest Service is addressing public and Congressional concerns to ensure recreation fees are; (1) convenient (making it as easy as possible for visitors to comply with fee requirements); (2) consistent (visitors expect a similar fee for similar activities, facilities, and services; thus a fee program will only be established where certain amenities or services are provided); (3) beneficial (demonstrating the added value the visitor receives in exchange for fees); and (4) accountable (building trust by informing the public on program investments and performance).

Each unit that is participating in the Fee Demo program has reviewed how its current fee program fits with the Blueprint. Those units that do not conform to the national criteria have been changed. All new projects that are proposed will follow the Blueprint criteria. Some changes that have been implemented include:

- The Adventure Pass in Southern California (includes the Angeles, Cleveland, Los Padres and San Bernardino National Forests) has identified four free areas where the Adventure Pass is not required, while designating 12 free days for all sites. This was implemented in response to public comments to provide areas where a fee will not be charged.
- The Northwest Forest Pass program in Oregon and Washington has removed 385 sites where a pass will not be required. Currently 679 day-use recreation sites on national forests in the Pacific Northwest are included in the Northwest Forest Pass.
- The Sawtooth National Forest Trailhead-Parking Pass Recreation Fee Project has removed 18 trailheads from the program. Only 20 of the 38 trailheads in the Sawtooth project met the Blueprint criteria. The Agency will no longer charge fees at the 18 trailheads that do not meet the definition for a significantly developed day-use site.

In addition to the changes listed above, the Forest Service had implemented additional changes to fee sites based on public feedback to provide better service and improve efficiency:

- The Yankee Boy Basin area, part of the Canyon Creek project on the Grand Mesa-Uncompaghere National Forest in Colorado, has suspended fees for off-highway vehicle travel for one year to allow local groups the opportunity to manage and monitor the area.

- The Salmon River project on the Salmon-Challis National Forest in Idaho reduced fees this year (from \$5.00/day/person to \$4.00/day/person) because necessary infrastructure has been completed so not as much revenue is needed.

Interagency Coordination and Consistency in Developing Fee Policies

The strongest aspect of the Fee Demo program has been the coordinated efforts between the Forest Service and agencies in the Department of the Interior to minimize confusion and making recreation fees more convenient and beneficial. Our experience has shown that the visiting public does not distinguish between lands managed by different federal agencies. Thus, the Department has tried to implement a program that streamlines management across different boundaries. In implementing such a program, revenue has decreased in some instances, but the agencies have been able to provide a consistent program, which has significantly enhanced our ability to serve the public. Examples of interagency efforts include:

- In April 2003, the Forest Service dramatically broadened the application of the Golden Eagle Passport program to provide interagency application and benefits. This change was based on guidance from the Interagency Recreational Fee Council (Fee Council) which worked to facilitate coordination and consistency among the agencies on the implementation of recreation fee policies. The Council developed standards for a new fee structure to replace the outdated entrance and use fees established under LWCFR. Using the framework of this new fee structure, the Agency started accepting the Golden Eagle, Golden Age, and Golden Access passports at all Forest Service sites that charge a basic fee. Previously, only 18 Forest Service sites accepted these passports, now over 1500 sites accept them.
- Starting in March 2003, Federal and State agencies in Washington and Oregon are, for the first time, offering a convenient interagency day-use recreation pass that is accepted at many public, day-use fee areas. The Washington and Oregon Recreation Pass is an add-on to the existing Golden Eagle Passport program and will be honored at all National Forest, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sites, in addition to 26 Oregon State Parks charging a day-use fee, 20 Washington State Parks charging a daily vehicle parking fee, and 6 Army Corps of Engineers sites charging facility-use fees.

Suggestions for Permanent Recreation Fee Authority

The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior have learned a great deal from experience in administering Fee Demo, and are eager to translate that experience into a permanent recreation

fee program with Congressional support. Federal lands have provided Americans and visitors from around the world with special places for recreation, education, reflection and solace. The pattern of recreation on our Federal lands has changed dramatically and has increased exponentially. More than ever before, Americans are choosing to recreate on all Federal lands, in particular their National Forests. The Forest Service has estimated that over 211 million annual visits occur on National Forests, a two-fold increase since the 1960s. This increase in visitation means an increase in visitor demand for adequate visitor facilities and services. The Department wants to work with Congress and the public to ensure that our Federal lands continue to play an important role in American life and culture. To this end, permanent recreation fee authority is needed. From our knowledge, experience, and lessons learned from the past, here are some suggestions for a successful fee program. These suggestions adhere to the guiding principles established by the Fee Council that fees should be beneficial, fair and equitable, efficient, consistent, implemented collaboratively, convenient, and they should provide for accountability to the public.

A permanent recreation fee program should: (1) promote interagency coordination; (2) establish an interagency national pass; (3) enhance partnerships with states and gateway communities; (4) establish agency site-specific and regional multi-entity passes; (5) provide for a new system of basic and expanded recreation fees; (6) provide for better reporting on the use of revenues; (7) provide necessary authorities to implement the program; and (8) provide criteria for accountability and control of revenues collected.

1. Promote Interagency Coordination

There has been debate in Congress and with the public as to whether an interagency recreation fee program should be permanently established. The Department believes the question should be asked if the public is benefiting from enhanced recreational facilities, settings and services that result from a fee being charged. If this is the case, we suggest that an interagency recreation fee program is needed. More and more people are recreating on a national forest. Whether they are visiting a day-use site like a trailhead, or recreating at a developed campground, visitors to public lands expect the same amenities, facilities, and services as those enjoying a national park.

As Assistant Secretary Lynn Scarlett stated, examples of areas where the public does not differentiate between land management agencies, but expects the same amenities and use of the land in similar locations, is the red rocks areas in Nevada, Arizona, and Utah. Visitors to these areas can recreate on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area in Nevada), lands managed by the Forest Service (the Sedona Red Rocks Area in Arizona), and lands managed by the National Park Service (Arches National Park in Utah). In all three areas, similar recreation opportunities exist within the various natural settings and opportunities vary depending on the area selected. Public expectations though, for the same amenities and services in each area are the same.

The authorization of an interagency recreation fee program would enhance coordination among agencies and create a seamless, collaborative, efficient, and effective fee program that is well understood by the public. Such a program would allow land management agencies an opportunity to improve the recreational facilities under their management and enhance the experience of the visiting public.

Since the inception of Fee Demo in 1996, the Forest Service has shown that it can manage this type of program that provides various benefits to the American public. The Department believes permanent recreation fee authority is needed so we can continue to provide recreational opportunities and services to those who recreate on Federal lands. The Forest Service Fee Demo program has generated over \$161 million to enhance the visitor experience at 105 projects in 123 National Forests and Grasslands across 36 States and Puerto Rico. In 2003, the Agency's program generated \$38.7 million dollars. The funds from this program have made a crucial difference in providing quality recreation services to the public, reducing the maintenance backlog, enhancing facilities, improving visitor services and operations, strengthening public safety and security, developing new partnerships, educating America's youth, and conserving natural resources. Some examples include:

- Maintaining 465 miles of trail on the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon.

- Rehabilitating the Scioto Shooting Range on the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee (installation of target walkways, shooting tables, and a sound abatement berm).
- Replacing 8 picnic tables, 40 fire rings with grills, and 1 water tank on the Klamath National Forest in California.
- Upgrading concrete walkways and paths for better accessibility on the Payette River Recreation Complex (Payette National Forest).

As stated above, the Forest Service has been able to use Fee Demo revenues in areas that benefit the American public. An interagency recreation fee program would allow the Forest Service, along with the other agencies in the Department of the Interior, an opportunity to continue to provide the recreation settings, services, and facilities that the American public expects when visiting their Federal lands. Interagency coordination is needed to ensure recreation fees are convenient, consistent, and beneficial.

2. Establish an Interagency National Pass

With the establishment of an interagency recreation fee program, an interagency national pass should be created. By consolidating the Golden Passport program established under the LWCFA and the National Parks Passport (established in 2001), an interagency pass would decrease visitor confusion. Currently the Golden Eagle, Golden Age, and Golden Access passports are accepted on Forest Service units that charge an entrance or basic use fee, but the National Parks Pass is not accepted as this pass is only valid at National Parks, unless the pass has been upgraded with a Golden Eagle hologram. Any interagency national pass should still be provided to seniors at a discount and free of charge to people with a permanent disability.

3. Enhance Partnerships with States and Gateway Communities

An interagency recreation fee program will provide a foundation to seek new partnerships with other Federal, State, County, and Gateway Communities as needed. By expanding the avenues for collaborative efforts, we enlist others to help us to meet the recreational demand of the visiting public. The Forest Service has developed numerous partnerships over the years to help us in delivering a successful Fee Demo program. A permanent fee program would allow the Forest Service, along with the Interior agencies, to make long-term investments on current partnerships and initiate new partnerships where needed.

Along the South Fork of the Snake River in Idaho a partnership between Federal, State, and local entities has evolved to cooperatively manage recreation sites spread along a 62 mile stretch of the Snake River. The use of fees collected from boat launching, and other activities in the river corridor, is determined on a consensus basis by the partnership group, regardless of which jurisdiction collects the fee. The partnership includes the Forest Service (Caribou-Targhee National Forest), the Bureau of Land Management, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and Madison, Bonneville, and Jefferson Counties. Revenues from the program include providing restroom facilities and litter control along the river.

4. Establish Agency Site-Specific and Regional Multi-Entity Passes

Any permanent recreation fee authority should also allow agencies to establish agency site-specific or regional multi-entity passes in addition to an interagency national pass. In some cases, regional passes meet the needs of visitors who want to recreate only in a certain area or state. The Washington and Oregon Recreation Pass is a good example of a regional pass that crosses many jurisdictional boundaries. Another example of a regional pass is the Visit Idaho Playground Pass.

The Visit Idaho Playground Pass is an interagency program operated by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, and the Idaho Department of Parks. The pass is valid for those who choose to recreate on public lands in Idaho. Passes are available for purchase via a website, or by a toll-free number for visitor convenience. Revenues are shared according to a formula developed for the business plan, and revenues are directed back to the recreation sites for improvements in facilities and services.

5. Provide for a New System of Basic and Expanded Recreation Fees

As stated previously, the Forest Service in 2003 started accepting the Golden Age, Golden Eagle, and Golden Access passports at over 1500 sites, where previously only 18 sites accepted them. These passports are honored usually where an entrance fee is charged, not a use fee. A

new structure should be developed that is based on use of the sites and facilities, not entrance into a particular site. This new fee structure would reduce fee layering and develop some consistency among and within agencies to avoid visitor confusion and frustration about what constitutes an entrance fee and what constitutes a use fee.

A new system of basic and expanded recreation fees should minimize fee layering of entrance and use fees. Under the new system, the basic fee would be charged in an area that has some expenditure in services and facilities, and an expanded fee would be charged in areas where additional facilities or amenities are provided, such as a developed campground or boating area, specialized interpretative services or a transportation system.

6. Provide for Better Reporting on the Use of Revenues

The Department believes any permanent recreation fee program should have components for ensuring the agencies are accountable to Congress and the public and report revenues and expenditures. Agencies should collect good data and publish annually public documentation showing how the fee program is administered. In producing a report, the Department would evaluate fee programs to consider the cost of collection, adherence to policy, use of revenues, fiscal safeguards, and how well organizational, site, or community goals are achieved.

The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are preparing the Fiscal Year 2003 Recreational Fee Demonstration Program Progress Report to Congress. This report should be sent to Congress shortly, and we look forward to any constructive feedback you may have after reviewing the report.

7. Provide Necessary Authorities to Implement the Program

Any permanent recreation fee program should provide authority for the Federal land management agencies to work with volunteers, develop fee management agreements with any governmental or nongovernmental entities, and establish procedures to protect fees collected (law enforcement). In some cases, the Forest Service has implemented Fee Demo utilizing a large cadre of volunteers to sell recreation fee passes, maintain trails, clean facilities, refurbish

buildings and archaeological sites, and provide educational programs. An example includes the Adventure Pass Program in Southern California, which is implemented through the use of private sector vendors (small and large local businesses) who sell the pass at over 400 locations to communities near the forests. Use of private vendors makes it convenient to purchase an Adventure Pass in advance of a trip to the forest.

An important component of a recreation fee program is enforcement of fee payment and security for the receipts. For implementation to be fair and equitable, a recreation fee program must ensure that everyone who uses facilities and services for which a fee is charged pays the fee. Security per revenues collected also must be provided.

8. Provide Criteria for Accountability and Control of Revenues Collected

Accountability is one of the guiding principles established by the Fee Council. In being accountable, the Forest Service is collecting good data and publishing annually in a report to Congress how the fee program is being administered. Fee Demo revenues and expenditures are accounted for separately from appropriated funds, which is consistent with program authority and Federal Accounting Standards. Because the Agency uses several expenditure categories to track fee demo accomplishments (categories that were established in the 1996 Fee Demo legislation), some reporting overlaps may have existed, but the total expenditures accounted for were accurate. Starting with the fiscal 2003 report to Congress, the Forest Service will reduce the number of reporting categories and be more consistent with the Department of the Interior in reporting fee revenues and expenditures.

Working with Counties in Revenue Expenditures

One of the fundamental lessons the Department has learned from the demonstration phase of the program is that support for recreation fees is contingent on the revenues being invested directly at the site where they are collected. Apportioning some recreation fee revenues to States and counties, without targeted investment into the sites where the revenues were collected, would create significant problems for the program, and may not be acceptable to those who pay recreation fees to a particular site.

Also, some counties provide more services and have a different relationship to visitors than other counties and a blanket provision to return recreation fees back to a county would not reflect those differences. The Forest Service has worked to develop partnerships or agreements with local communities, organizations, or county sheriff's offices to help us to deliver a successful Fee Demo program, while providing some fee receipts to those entities involved in implementing the program. Revenue sharing would remove a vital avenue where land management agencies can work with local communities and counties to be involved in implementing a fee program, and still return revenues to the site for enhancement and services.

The Department understands how local governments in some counties where certain Federal lands are located believe they should share in recreation receipts. The Department would like to work with the Committee to determine what this may mean to a particular site. Any decrease in fee revenues would mean less facilities, services, or revenue for reinvestment, thus creating a disincentive for having a recreation fee at all.

Another option for working with local governments could be development of fee management agreements, where a county could help an agency implement a recreation fee program by providing fee collection or processing services, visitor reservation services, law enforcement to provide additional public safety and security, emergency medical services, or marketing resources. These fee management agreements need to provide the visiting public with services that are visible and are viewed as beneficial by users of a fee site.

On some units, the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management is currently working with some counties to implement these types of fee management agreements. In Arizona, the Tonto National Forest has an agreement with the Maricopa and Gila County Sheriff's Offices to provide additional law enforcement personnel and emergency medical service teams at recreation lakes on busy weekends and holidays. Under permanent recreation fee authority, revenue sharing could be identified for those state or local governments that enter into such an agreement with the Secretary.

Conclusion

The Department has learned a great deal from our experiences in administering the Fee Demo program and is ready to translate that experience into a permanent fee program. With the changes that have implemented, from lessons learned, and with development of national criteria for the Forest Service's recreation fee program, the Department is eager to work with this Subcommittee and the Department of the Interior to develop a successful permanent fee program. Establishment of permanent recreation fee authority does not mean our learning will end. Fine-tuning of the program will continue to occur.

I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, other members of the Subcommittee, and our interagency partners to implement a permanent recreation fee program. This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.