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New law allows federal recreation areas to charge fees for decade

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TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) - Visitors to national forests and other federal lands who had hoped temporary recreation fees would soon vanish will have no such luck. The fees were first imposed in 1996 on a temporary basis and have been renewed by Congress every two years since. But last fall, Congress wrote the fees into law for at least a decade.

They cover things like picnicking, boating, hiking or access to developed recreational areas to view scenic or cultural heritage sites. And budget-strapped forest officials are elated to have them as an essential revenue source.

"It really is important. I can't overstate how underfunded the recreation program is in general, and certainly our budgets are not going up as far as appropriated funds," said Valerie Guardia, assistant director for recreation with the U.S. Forest Service's southwest regional office in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Demand for recreational facilities is definitely on the rise and we can't keep up with it today, and so the fee revenue has been really important."

Many outdoor enthusiasts have a different take on the fees.

"It's been a real problem," said ecologist Daniel Patterson of the Tucson-based environmental organization, Center for Biological Diversity. "It's served to provide cover for the real issue, chronic underfunding (by Congress) of the natural resource agencies."

"Why does this fee money not get spent on protecting wildlife habitat? Why is it

spent on industrial-style pavement infrastructure for roads?"

In Arizona, recreation fees in four of the state's six national forests -- the Coconino, Coronado, Prescott and Tonto -- brought in more than \$3.8 million during the 2003 fiscal year. There were no fee projects on the Kaibab and Apache-Sitgreaves forests.

Money raised allowed for the protection of numerous panels of ancient rock art, said Connie Birkland, a spokeswoman for the Coconino forest's Red Rock District. "It has helped us to implement what the public wanted to see and how they wanted to see the national forest managed."

At least 80 percent of the fees collected are returned to the site of collection for enhanced visitor services and to reduce the maintenance backlog on trails, boat ramps, toilets, signs and the like, Guardia said.

Nationally, the fees generate some \$170 million a year for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior.

Even so, Guardia said, "It's important to remember that most recreational uses and sites will continue to be fee-free, as it's always been."

But there will be some changes under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

Fees can be charged only at developed sites, and facilities must meet certain criteria including developed parking, permanent toilets, permanent trash receptacles, interpretive signs, visitor exhibits or kiosks, picnic tables and security services, Guardia said.

"It's going to tighten up the boundaries of what you can and cannot do," said Jeff Saari, another Forest Service official in Albuquerque. "The original fee demonstration program was just that: a test, with a lot of latitude. We tested things, and some worked, some did not."

The public is more accepting of fees where a lot of improved facilities are evident than when money is spent on measures like resource protection or habitat restoration, Saari said.

"Most of what's acceptable is the most visible," he said.

Congress approved the law as part of a larger appropriations bill in November, and President Bush signed it Dec. 8. National forests and parks and agencies with recreational components such as the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be eligible to charge a fee for visitors using certain facilities.

But the law also requires establishment of resource advisory committees to review existing and proposed fee projects to determine whether they are eligible to charge fees.

"We anticipate that across the country, there will be some existing programs that will no longer meet the criteria and won't be continued," Guardia said. "The new legislation is actually more restrictive."

"The demonstration did what it was supposed to do: We tried different things," she said. "Congress let us know what they didn't like and what didn't work by restricting certain things in this new law."

Initially, there will be no increases in fees, which currently vary by location -- for instance, \$2 for watercraft daily use

passes on the Tonto National Forest's Salt and Verde Rivers Recreation Complex, \$5 a day for Sabino and Madera canyons in the Coronado National Forest, \$15 for a weekly Red Rock pass or \$20 for an annual pass. The law creates an interagency fee program and will establish one new national pass -- called America the Beautiful, regardless of agency.

It's all a work in progress, and the impact isn't fully understood yet, Guardia said. "It's going to mean doing some things differently."