

Keep ENS
Daily
News in
your line
of sight!
Click
here to
subscribe
for only
\$24 a
year.

Search ENS News

Type Search Term,
Hit Enter

[Research Help](#)

WorldScan

- [UK](#)
[Poor Data Threatens Global Conservation Targets](#)
- [CANADA](#)
[New Brunswick OKs Toxic Waste Facility](#)
- [VIETNAM/USA](#)
[Dioxin from Agent Orange Found in Vietnamese Food](#)
- [AUSTRALIA](#)
[Poll: 95 Percent Majority Backs Wind Power](#)
- [CHINA](#)
[Clean Energy Sought to Replace Coal Power Plants](#)
- [SOUTH AFRICA](#)
[Soweto Gets a Facelift](#)

Senate Panel Eyes Permanent Fees for Public Lands

By J.R. Pegg

WASHINGTON, DC, September 9, 2003 (ENS) - As Congress struggles to adequately fund the National Park Service, many are keen to give the agency permanent authority to set and collect recreation fees from park visitors. The Bush administration told a Senate panel today that it wants to extend this permanent authority beyond the Park Service to other federal land management agencies, a move that critics say is unsupported by the American public.

At issue is the fee demonstration program created by Congress in 1996. The program, which has been renewed four times by Congress through the appropriations process, allows Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to collect recreation fees and reinvest those fees into enhancing visitor facilities and services.

The program is set to expire on October 1, 2004. A bill introduced by Wyoming Republican Craig Thomas, would make the program permanent only for the Park Service - a move that appears to have broad bipartisan support.

Testifying on Thomas' bill today, Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Policy Lynn

News You Can Use

Enliven your website or paper with ENS News.

Daily headlines & briefs available

[Contact Us](#) for details.

AmeriScan

[Navy Flies Into Strong Opposition Over New Landing Field](#)

[Park Advocates Urge Congress to Tackle Air Pollution](#)

[California Rebels Against New Source Review Revisions](#)

[California Assembly Votes to End Ag Air Exemption](#)

[Energy Department Picks Mercury Emissions Test Projects](#)

[The Biggest Chill](#)

[Male Baboons Care for Their Kids](#)

[Coal Eating Bacteria May Improve Methane Recovery](#)

Scarlett told the Senate Subcommittee on National Parks that the administration supports the bill "if amended to provide interagency authority."



Recreation fees have a long history in some of the national parks. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)

"Authorization of a permanent program would allow the agencies to better serve visitors by making long term investments, and creating more partnerships," Scarlett told the subcommittee. "The recreation fee program is vital to our ability to manage lands for the benefit of visitors and enhance the recreation facilities available to them, including our ability to address the maintenance backlog challenges in the parks and in our other land agencies."

Scarlett says visits to the nation's public lands are increasing across the board, making the need for permanent fee authority necessary for all four agencies.

"The pattern of recreation on our federal lands has changed dramatically," she said. "National Parks continue to be a favorite destination for American families. However, more than ever before, Americans also are choosing to recreate on lands managed by other federal agencies such BLM and the Fish and Wildlife Service."

She noted that currently some 87 percent of BLM locations and 94 percent of Forest Service and

Fish and Wildlife Service locations do not have fees.

"Federal land programs have provided Americans and visitors from around the world special places for recreation, education, reflection and solitude," Scarlett said. "Fulfilling this mission does require that we need adequate and steady funding and that we are able to invest in visitor service facilities."

Allowing all four agencies to impose fees makes sense, Scarlett explained, because "visitors do not distinguish between federal land managers and they expect to find the same amenities."

But critics bristle at this suggestion. They say there has been little opposition to the Park Service fees - from the public or conservationists - because fee collection has a historic legacy at the national parks.

Recreation fees at some of the national parks date back to beginning of the Park Service in 1916 and the agency's recreation fee authority was expanded under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act in 1965.



The Park Service says surveys indicate most Americans do not object to paying for access to national parks. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)

The fee demonstration program increased fees already in place and added others, authorizing the agency to collect fees at 100 of its 388 units.

Conservation groups have given cautious support

to making the program permanent. The National Parks Conservation Association, for example, is wary the move could undermine efforts to ensure needed increases in operations and maintenance funding for the national park system, and recommends the program be extended for five to seven years, rather than simply be made permanent.

It is hard to argue that the program has not been a success for the Park Service. In 2002 alone, the agency collected some \$125 million in fees through the program, much of which has gone to address upkeep and maintenance needs at the parks.

Under the program, individual parks are able to keep 80 percent of the receipts from the program for protection and enhancement of that area.

The remaining 20 percent is used on an agency wide basis for parts of the system that are precluded from participating in the program.

The fee demonstration program at the Park Service is really about "fee retention," said Robert Funkhouser, president of the Colorado based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. "It is about allowing the National Park Service to retain the fees that the agency has been collecting for decades."

But in the BLM, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service, the program "is about establishing new fees and it is this new authority that has been so controversial and unpopular that we are opposed to."

Funkhouser told the subcommittee that the program has been a "financial failure" at these three agencies.



The

national park system faces the strain from a shrinking budget as visits the parks climb. Some 277 million individuals visited the national parks last year. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)

Net revenues in 2001 for the BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service combined are estimated to be less than \$4 million, and the Forest Service spent \$15 million in 2001 to collect \$35 million in fees.

"These new fees clearly are a new tax, a double tax and a regressive tax," Funkhouser said.
"Opposition to fee demo in these three agencies has been overwhelming and widespread."

The agencies - except for the Park Service - have not used the fees to improve the land or facilities, Funkhouser said, a fundamental premise of the original basis for the program.

The bill's sponsor appeared to agree.

"The collection of fees by federal land agencies should be restricted to improved facilities," Thomas said in his opening statement.

But later in the hearing Thomas told Scarlett that if specific criteria were developed, he would not have "particular opposition to extending this to other agencies."

Thomas' bill, titled "Recreation Fee Authority Act of 2003," sets criteria for fee implementation and directs the Interior Secretary to establish a

minimum number of fees and avoid fee layering where possible.

It allows the Interior Secretary to enter into agreements with state agencies to accept their passes and retains the 80/20 split of revenues laid out in the existing program. The Wyoming Republican says he hopes to iron out the bill and get it to the Senate floor this year.

Copyright Environment News Service (ENS) 2003. All Rights Reserved.