

Fees for using wilderness being considered

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Forest Service tests reaction

By Bill Loftus
of the Tribune

The U.S. Forest Service is quietly shopping around the idea of charging for admission to the Frank Church —River of No Return Wilderness.

Payette National Forest Supervisor Vito (Sonny) LaSalle of McCall outlined the idea for the Back Country Horsemen of Idaho's state directors at a recent meeting.

The fee plan he broached there is included in an administrative study report prepared by Forest Service officials and members of the public released last July.

The plan could raise from \$300,000 to \$600,000 each year, providing more money for managing and protecting the wilderness area.

An appendix to the report suggests a five-year test of charging wilderness visitors to provide the money needed for trail maintenance and other needs.

The proposal calls for fees ranging from \$5 for aircraft landing at wilderness airstrips to \$5 a day for rafters floating the Salmon River or its Middle Fork.

Hikers or horsemen visiting the wilderness would be charged \$5 for an individual five-day permit or \$15 for a family permit.

Season passes would cost \$25 for individuals or \$50 for families, according to the proposal.

The budget for the Forest Service is unlikely to grow much in coming years and may actually shrink.

Funds for maintenance of wilderness

Most remain cautious about idea

By Bill Loftus
of the Tribune

Fans of the Frank Church — River of No Return Wilderness say the idea of user fees may be the wave of the future, it may even be one that the public will accept.

But one of the stumbling blocks in asking wilderness users to pay their own way will be the perception that the U.S. Forest Service subsidizes the logging industry much more than recreationists.

Ron Watters, Idaho State University's Outdoor Program director at Pocatello, said he fails to see why public lands users should pay the fee.

"I think the general public

would react about the same way I am," he added.

The Forest Service already subsidizes the construction of logging roads with far more money than the modest amount it spends on its recreation programs, Watters argued.

Watters and Richard Smith of Salmon are members of an ad hoc advisory committee appointed by Rep. Richard Stallings, D-Idaho, to consider a proposal for a five-year test of user fees for the Church Wilderness.

"That's not something I'm initially in favor of off the top of my head," Smith said. "The forests are for the people."

Smith is president of the Back Country Horsemen of Idaho and

heard Payette National Forest Supervisor Vito (Sonny) LaSalle outline the idea at a recent meeting.

Smith said he supports the idea of at least putting user fees on the table to discuss.

"I'm personally not adverse to paying for it but I would need to talk to other people about it," he added.

Grant Simonds, Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association executive director at Boise, is another member of Stallings' committee.

Simonds is leary of emerging as an outfitter in support of charging the public more to use public lands.

User fees are becoming more

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campsites or trails, or river management programs, have always been in short supply.

"I had bounced around the idea of user fees for sometime," LaSalle said. Members of Idaho's congressional delegation had been cool at best, convinced that the public would not favor the idea, he said.

His own reading of wilderness users, the ones he's talked to at least, is they would accept user fees.

"They say I wouldn't mind paying a fair price as long as the money did not go to Washington (D.C.) and the money was used to benefit whatever resource I'm using," he added.

The Forest Service report called for testing out wilderness fees on the Church area for five years. After that the program's success and acceptance could be weighed.

The Forest Service already charges user fees for other programs, such as the Granger-Thye Act which allows the agency to rent backcountry cabins to the public and use the rental fee to maintain them.

LaSalle said he has been talking to groups about the proposal to make sure they have heard about it, not to lobby for it. "I cannot go out and lobby for legislation. I can only say this is a proposal that's been made."

Rep. Richard Stallings, D-Idaho, has formed an ad hoc committee to review the report and the user fee proposal.

Stallings will reserve judgment on the idea until the task force has had a chance to review it, said Cary Jones, his natural resources assistant.

"I don't think you've heard the last word on this issue," Jones added.

Cathy Fuller, Stallings' district representative at Boise, said the committee's members are being called to see when they can begin meeting.

"We're hoping it might be sometime in February," she added. "We're asking them to have their comments to the study and their own ideas prepared and be ready to discuss them."

Fees From 1B

familiar to the public in areas ranging from registration fees to summer softball leagues to pay the costs of lighting baseball fields to gas taxes to pay for highway maintenance.

Charging an admission fee for using public lands is not going to please many of those who use the wilderness, however, Simonds said.

"There'll probably be a stronger voice or outcry saying, 'Over my dead body.'"

"I think that will be one reaction we'll probably hear. I think there's a majority of folks out there, however, who are willing to pay. I'm not sure we'll hear from them," Simonds added.

Boise-based rafting outfitter Doug Tims, the association's

president, said the group has been actively lobbying Congress in recent years to boost budgets for recreation programs.

"It is our belief that what we are in effect achieving is bringing some of that money back to the states," he added.

Outfitters and their clients already pay substantial fees to operate on the nation's national forests and federally managed rivers, Tims said.

Private users and organizations are also beginning to talk about ways to raise money for managing rivers, too, he noted.

The big asterisk to that statement, however, is the money paid for use of a river or wilderness must come back to benefit it and the public who is paying the fee, he added.

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