

Committee on Resources

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Testimony of

American Motorcyclist Association

Senior Legislative Assistant of Government Relations

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to the

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Committee on Resources

House of Representatives

September 17, 2003

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Regarding

The Forest Service Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

Before The

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Patrick Holtz, Esq. and I am Senior Legislative Assistant of the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA), an organization with over 270,000 motorcycle enthusiast members. The AMA appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the Forest Service Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (RFDP).

The reason for AMA's presence today is two-fold. First, the AMA would like to formally announce its conditional support for making the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program permanent. Second, we are here to encourage this committee to improve the program in specific areas within the United States Forest Service (USFS), before this significant designation is made.

In previous testimony provided to this committee, the AMA asserted that there are several essential principles, which must be contained in any recreation fee proposal. They are:

That the fees are equitable, and aimed at recovering costs where the services provided, or the facilities used, would otherwise represent significant costs to the taxpayers;

That the fee system is efficient, costing the least amount practical to administer;

That the fees are convenient for the recreationist, so that voluntary compliance is readily achievable;

That the fee system is coherent and integrated, so that overlapping charges are minimized and federal, state and local fees are integrated where appropriate; and

All fees collected are maintained and used at the site where the fee was generated.

The AMA was pleased to read in the United States General Accounting Office's (GAO) April 2003 study that the United States Forest Service has made a good faith effort in upholding these principles. However, as with any program of this size and scope, there are bound to be problems. Indeed, the GAO study is revealing, especially in its comparison of the Forest Service program to that of the National Park Service (NPS).

As a basic premise, it would seem that the GAO study confirms that all fees collected are maintained and used at the site where the fee was generated. According to the GAO "local forest managers retain between 90 and 100 percent of the fee demonstration revenue at the sites where fees are collected."

However, the most striking revelation in the GAO study is that, "the Forest Service does not provide consistent information on where fee revenue is being spent." The AMA finds it specifically alarming that the Forest Service does not catalog the recreation fee expenditures on "deferred maintenance" even though it has a significant backlog. The Forest Service cites the "temporary nature of the program" and the authorizing legislation.

Meanwhile, the NPS has not used this as an excuse for inaction. According to the GAO study the NPS spent almost 35% of its fee demonstration revenues on maintenance in fiscal year 2001, addressing a multi-billion dollar backlog. This is relevant because the motorized community for the most part does not benefit from this at the NPS. It is currently illegal for anyone to ride a motorcycle on any trails on National Park Service land. While the NPS has taken advantage of the program to address deferred maintenance needs, the Forest Service has focused on visitor services.

Specifically, the GAO cites the Angeles and San Bernadino National Forests, whose primary source of revenue is the "Adventure Pass." The Adventure Pass is required for vehicle access, including motorcycles, to the national forests in Southern California. The annual Adventure Pass costs \$30 (\$15 with senior or disability discounts) or \$5 for a daily pass. As opposed to addressing deferred maintenance needs, these national forests spent 80 percent of their revenue on "visitor services, and maintaining operations, maintenance of facilities, and for providing interpretive services." This is meritorious. But shouldn't land managers address the specific long-term needs of those who are paying the fees?

In addition, the Forest Service can not be properly credited for the deferred maintenance it is conducting under the Recreational Fee Program. For example, land managers at the Nantahala River Gorge in the North Carolina National Forest used recreation fee money to address their deferred maintenance needs by rehabilitating a trail. However, it was cataloged as "resource preservation and enhancement expenditure" according to GAO. Therefore, it is not credited under the Forest Service's daunting backlog.

The Allegheny National Forest (ANF) recognizes the specific needs of off-highway vehicles (OHV). OHV use is the fastest growing recreational activity on the Allegheny National Forest. The annual economic impact in Pennsylvania exceeds \$17,000,000 annually. In order to maintain high quality experiences, the ANF returns \$200,000 annually first to the maintenance of existing trails, then if funds are available to begin planning for the expansion of trails. If the Recreational Fee program becomes permanent, the Forest Service must develop a system that credits those who address maintenance.

The Recreational Fee Demonstration Program has enormous potential to enhance recreation opportunities. But, to be successful it has to receive full public support. In order to receive that support, the Forest Service must think boldly and implement a fee system that efficiently accounts for its deferred maintenance needs; rewards land managers who work on those needs, and provide a coherent and integrated experience for the user. The AMA looks forward to working with the Forest Service and Members of Congress in applying these principles to a permanent Recreational Fee Program.

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