

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

[forests](#) - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6205 - - (202) 225-0691

Witness Statement

Testimony for the House Subcommittee on Forest Health
Ref: P.L. 104-134 Recreation Fee Demonstration Program
By John Viehman, Publisher-BACKPACKER magazine
September 25, 2001

Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the fee demonstration project.

As you will hear from other witnesses today, the program has not been without its shortcomings and detractors but it has made a positive impact overall. As you know, implementation was left up to the various agencies and only loosely coordinated. As a consequence, there were plenty of situations where the public was upset and at best confused. But everyone involved learned a lot, and that was the point of the project: To test the concept.

While my position is that the concept has been proven sound, I have to stress that it's sound only if we take what we've learned and adjust our sights accordingly. And that the time for "testing" has passed. We should vote this up or down, make changes where they're needed... but let's make a decision. Five years is enough.

I have some reservations about how and where we implement new fees or increase existing fees for visitation to our public lands. However, as I indicated, I welcome the concept of having those who visit public lands, for whatever reason, pay for that privilege. It's important that we all recognize the value of the resource, and this program effectively does that. Consumer marketing experts know full well that, if you give away your product, the consumer attaches little value to it. The notion that visitors have paid for our public lands through taxes, while not to be diminished, simply doesn't provide the direct connection to create "value" with visitors to, in this case, our nation's forests. Certainly I've seen evidence of devaluing the resource from all users of public lands, and I'd wager that it relates to what those users either paid or didn't pay to be there.

Bills such as this fee demonstration project are good for our outdoor community for lots of reasons. For one, I welcome the recognition that wilderness lovers are an economic force. And the concern expressed by some detractors that this will commercialize our outdoor resource... well, what rock have they been living under all these years? The logging, mining and cattle grazing on our public lands have been there from the beginning, and that's certainly commercialization in my book. No, let's agree now to put a legitimate and fair price tag on outdoor recreation and welcome it with open arms, because it'll mean outdoor recreation has earned its right to a larger voice in management of the resource--something it hasn't had in just about every debate for as long as I've been writing letters to Congress.

This fee demonstration project makes a powerful statement about the economic value of outdoor recreation. Since 1996, it has fed over \$608 million in additional revenues to public lands, \$88.5 million of that to our nation's forests. <1>

Concerns about fees excluding certain segments of our society from public lands don't wash, frankly. Let's get over our misplaced guilt about elitism, or the concern that the backcountry may become the exclusive playground of America's upper crust. First of all, there are ways (voucher systems, work-for-credit programs, and innovative public-private sector programs, for example) to subsidize this end of things.

Secondly, statistics show that, in very quantifiable terms, the outdoors is not being used by those segments of the population that qualify as the struggling lower class. I'm not saying this is good, or that I like it, just that this is what the outdoor recreation world IS. If you take the average readers of BACKPACKER magazine as representative of the core, or center, of this outdoor user universe, you'll see median household incomes of over \$62,000, and 79 percent are college educated. <2> They are not anything but "upper class" to my mind.

Not only are they predominantly upper class but they have more than enough discretionary income to afford higher fees for using our public lands.

How much are we really asking them to pay, anyway? Well, it seems to be averaging out at about the equivalent of what it would cost for:

- two Happy Meals for your kids at MacDonald's;
- a ½-day of childcare (in Pennsylvania);
- barely two rides at an amusement park;
- two extra large boxes of popcorn at the theater;
- my monthly late charges for video rentals...

This is not a lot of money, and certainly not for high income households. Better still, every survey I've seen on this tells me that these people don't mind paying more for the privileges... with some important caveats:

At BACKPACKER magazine, we've tracked our readers' feelings on the issue of paying more for the past five years. What we've found is that overwhelmingly (to the tune of 84 percent!) <3> they're willing to pay more so long as the money finds its way directly back into the resource. When asked without the important caveat, the answer skewed heavily against any additional funding (to the tune of 89 percent opposed!) <3>

One independent survey (Roper <4>) shows that only 15 percent would be unwilling to pay additional fees if they were assured it would go toward the resource. Interestingly, nowhere has it been shown that higher fees have significantly impacted visitation. Quite the contrary, in the first year of new fees, from '96-97 visitation increased almost five percent. <5> Again, going back to my earlier comment, underlying some of this may be the notion that people value what they pay for, and the more they pay, the more they value it.

Park Service surveys show that 83 percent of users were satisfied with the fee amounts or felt they were too low. Early Forest Service surveys pegged it at anywhere from 57-68 percent satisfied. <6>

I alluded earlier to the notion of all users paying fair price for access to our nation's public lands. By extension, then, I'd add that, once we've established a baseline that accepts a value for recreational use of our public lands and a corresponding fee for that use, the same exercise should be applied to other users of our public lands, particularly timber, mining and grazing. Let's balance the scales so that the fees charged

reflect the impact.

Finally, I'd urge that the government consolidate its fees so that users aren't "nickel-and-dimed" at every corner. When you ask for an entrance fee, a parking fee, a backcountry permit fee, a trailhead fee, and god-knows-what-else-will-be-inflicted-upon-us, all at different points, you risk annoying users to the point of opposition to something they're now clearly in favor of. Besides, the Congressional directive originally asked the agencies to make the fee demonstration project innovative, *not* inconsistent. And certainly, if fees are charged, they need to be related to the use. That is, in highly developed areas of high use, there are obvious needs for facilities to minimize impact (e.g., parking lots, toilets, shelters, etc.) Visitors who use them, know the value and will support fees related to that usage. On the other hand, there is very little real cost to maintain backcountry areas that realize comparatively low visitation, so those visitors should not be charged the same fees, if any, as frontcountry visitors. My point is that much work needs to be done at each national forest site to determine the most equitable distribution of fees and whether fees are even warranted in some areas. It's not a "one fee serves all" scenario, by any stretch.

As an aside, I'd like to add that, while I'm representing my position as Publisher of BACKPACKER magazine and its readership, I also serve on the board of the Outdoor Industry Association, which is submitting testimony for the hearing record. I want to make it clear that I do not represent their position today. I encourage you to look over the OIA testimony carefully, however, because it includes some thoughtful analysis and a survey of other outdoor opinion leaders and businesspeople.

A summary of my key points:

1. The research among the vast, vocal majority of user groups on a national level clearly shows this is one government idea worth supporting.
2. User fees represent a much-needed financial shot in both arms for the Forest Service and our public lands generally.
3. Public-private partnerships can supplement this program to remove any barriers it might pose to the American public.
4. Before final implementation, agency heads should establish a period of public input and/or information exchange to ensure public support.
5. Fees and the fee structure need to be finely crafted based on the individual resource and user groups.
6. Other public land usage fees (e.g. timber, mining, and other resource extraction) should be evaluated to maintain parity with their relative impact and the market value of that resource.
7. It's time to stop testing and implement this program across-the-board.

Thank you for letting me speak to you today.

References/Footnotes:

1--Source: GAO Report To Congress, Nov. 1998 (GAO/RCED-99-7), pages 31 & 88.

2--Source: BACKPACKER magazine MRI-Doublebase 2001.

3--Source: BACKPACKER magazine April 1995 Editorial Survey

4--Source: "Outdoor Recreation in America 1998" by Roper-Starch, pages 4 & 26.

5--Source: GAO/RCED-99-7, page 76.

6--Source: Ibid, pages 6 & 80.

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