

## Monitoring Public Reactions to the U.S. Forest Service Recreation Fee Program

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### Introduction

Natural resource managers need to better understand the clientele for the recreation areas under their management. This clientele includes existing users and potential or former visitors who may have been displaced from the areas. Recently, scientists have debated the impact of recreation fees on visitors and potential visitors, and on social issues such as justice or fairness. The recreation fee program that was authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1996 is now permanent (the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004), in part due to the research that has helped managers develop and implement the program. This paper presents highlights of ongoing research/monitoring for the Forest Service recreation fee program in the Pacific Northwest. Statewide surveys of residents in Washington and Oregon were conducted in 1999, 2001, and 2003. This paper integrates findings from these efforts to describe public perceptions about the Forest Service's fee program in the Pacific Northwest over a six year period. The key issues are: Which activities should have a fee attached, what the balance should be between taxes and fees, and how the revenue should be spent.

### Methods

This study built on earlier fee research and provides a means of longitudinal evaluation of the recreation fee program. Accordingly, some survey

questions were replicated in each wave of the survey in order to track changes in the public's attitudes. New questions were added for assessment of the effectiveness of selected aspects or changes in the fee program. The data are from three independent telephone surveys, each in the fall and spaced two years apart, of randomly selected adults in the states of Oregon and Washington. The initial survey in 1999 had 1,676 completed interviews, the second in 2001 had 2,005 respondents, and the third one in 2003 obtained 800 completed interviews. Thus the entire database has 4,481 respondents.

### Results

In-depth questions about the fee program and revenue use were repeated on each survey. When asked about the acceptability of fees for various recreation activities, results were generally consistent between the three surveys. Fees were most acceptable for activities like RV camping, camping at campgrounds with facilities, and boat dock or ramp use— all activities for which fees have traditionally been charged. Likewise, fees were most unacceptable for stopping at scenic overlooks and picnicking or swimming at areas with no facilities. Respondents in 2001 were slightly less supportive of fees for off-highway vehicle use and collecting forest products, and more supportive of fees for boat dock/ramp use, rafting/canoeing, climbing, and interpretive programs and visitor centers.

Public opinion about the proper balance between taxes and user fees for operating recreation areas is a second major topic. The dominant response in all years was equal support from taxes and user fees, although there was a slight trend in 2001 towards increasing the proportion derived from taxes. Most people felt that charging some fees is acceptable and helps the Forest Service do a better job of protecting the land and providing recreational opportunities. In 2001, they were less likely to believe that charging fees will make it so only the rich can use the best areas of the National Forests. In general, residents strongly preferred imposing fees to closing sites or allowing them to deteriorate (if inadequate funds were available). In all three waves, respondents generally supported a variety of implementation options designed to enhance the fairness of the fee program, such as giving free passes to volunteers who have worked at Forest sites, setting aside some areas where no fees are charged, offering an annual pass that is accepted at all recreation areas, and making certain days free of charge.

All surveys asked residents about their priorities for how fee revenue should be spent. Maintaining the quality of the natural environment was the top rated priority, followed closely by maintaining restrooms and trails. Consistent with the earlier growth in acceptability of fees for interpretive programs and visitor centers, respondents in later waves expressed greater support for spending fees to provide recreation information.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Results of the fee monitoring program suggest that people's support for the recreation fees is related to their awareness of the reasons behind the program, how the money collected is used, and what benefits have come from the program. The results were used to fine tune the program during the demonstration period and influenced the permanent federal fee legislation passed in late 2004. For example, this legislation specified which types of fees could be used and the types of areas at which fees could be charged, based on the public's response to the tested fee programs. The repeated waves of surveys provided valuable information to gauge public reactions and make important improvements to

the fee program. Longitudinal surveys can play an important role in generating a positive outcome for agency programs that rely on public interaction, acceptance, and compliance to be successful.