

Appendix D. Federal Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

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Legislative Background

In 1993, Congress enacted deficit reduction legislation by passage of Public Law 103-66, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, which amended the 1965 Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. This fee legislation directed a number of changes in the U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recreation fee program. In the 1996 Interior appropriations bill, Congress gave BLM the authority to establish a demonstration program to test the collection, retention, and reinvestment of new admission and user fees. The legislation authorizes BLM, the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service to each implement 100 test projects (U.S. Department of the Interior et al. 2000). This new Recreational Fee Demonstration Program allows BLM to use all of the fee income for the costs of operating the sites where the fees are collected.

Fee Uses

Recreation use fees may be charged wherever the agencies are providing specialized recreational management, such as for use of campgrounds, use of boat launch facilities, backcountry camping under permits, river rafting where regulated. The fees range from \$3 to \$5 for daily use/parking permits, are typically \$40 for seasonal passes, and include a \$15 fee to climb Mount Shasta and \$100 per person fees to run the Grand Canyon's Colorado River.

Participating agencies are authorized to retain all of the revenues from the Program and to retain at least 80% of the revenues at the sites where they are collected. Funds generated may only be spent on recreational management and visitor facilities. The fees collected by the BLM are used to improve campgrounds, parking areas, visitor services, site access, safety and health services, and environmental protection (U.S. Department of the Interior et al. 2000).

Innovation in Fee Programs

There are many attempts to implement and evaluate innovative fee arrangements at the regional and local levels. Examples of these efforts include (U.S. Department of the Interior et al. 2000)

- **Use of Volunteers.** Several national wildlife refuges use volunteers to collect their fees. This use of volunteers is an increasingly important resource at fee sites of all the agencies participating in the Program.
- **Fee Collection Partnerships.** Some agencies are forming partnerships with volunteers and concessionaires to collect fees for the Program.
- **Interpretive Services as an Adjunct to Fees.** The BLM Eagle Lake Field Office in California entered into a cooperative venture on a trial basis with a local bus company to provide, for a small fee, shuttle service to bring bikes and riders back to their vehicles. On board the shuttle was an interpreter who explained resource features and sites of special interest along the route. The fall colors attracted more visitors, who came specifically to use the shuttle. Strong user demand necessitated additional buses for some of the busier weekends.
- **Automated Fee Collection.** In the California Desert District, BLM has more than 17 automated fee stations, with all machines under contract for collection and maintenance. This arrangement has allowed the BLM to use its human resources for other, more challenging jobs. Compliance has been very high, well accepted, and has been very convenient for the public. The machines are provided under a lease arrangement that includes machine maintenance and the collection and processing of the revenues.
- **Vendor Sales.** The BLM Wenatchee Field Office uses a seasonal use permit sticker. Permits are sold through vendors at a number of locations in the vicinity of the recreational fee area.

Results of BLM's Recreational Fee Demonstration Program

Under the Program, BLM increased its recreation fee projects from 10 in 1997 to 95 in 1999 (U.S. Department of the Interior et al. 2000). All of these sites have high numbers of visitors and a single point of entry to the fee site. Visitation to the Program sites in 1999 was relatively unchanged from visitation in years prior to Program implementation. There appears to be no correlation between the year a fee was introduced and a change in visitation.

Both general day-use fees and special activity permits (for river-float boating, off-highway-vehicle [OHV] riding, mountain biking, back country use, boat ramps, fishing, rock climbing, and hiking, in particular sites) were successful in generating revenues in excess of collection costs. The most successful method of fee collection was through the mail when permits were required for recreation activities. Fee collection by BLM representatives on site was also successful in achieving user compliance. The honor system has been shown to be moderately successful at recreation sites of high visitation but has resulted in the least compliance. (In some cases, members of groups that have had an important role in the development and management of a particular recreation site may expect that their contributions entitle them to free entrance.) The presence of agency representatives for enforcement led to both higher compliance rates and higher administrative costs (U.S. Department of the Interior et al. 2000).

Public Acceptance

The participating resource management agencies report high public acceptance of the fee program. Responding to agency surveys, approximately 90% of visitor respondents said the level

of fees is “about right” or “too low.” However, some recreational user groups, such as the International Mountain Bicycling Association and the Backcountry Horsemen of Washington, oppose user fees. They argue that public lands should be funded by taxes, that charging fees discriminates against low-income families, and that recreational interests that generate the most income (OHV use, power boating) will take precedence over lower impact activities (Inland Empire Chapter of Backcountry Horsemen of Washington Inc. 1999, International Mountain Bicycling Association 2000).

BLM has incorporated several suggestions from the public into the program, including the provision of free days for select groups, such as economically disadvantaged persons, educational institutions, and volunteers. Some pilot sites have public representatives on advisory boards.

References Cited

U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Forest Service. 2000. *Recreational fee demonstration program progress report to congress fiscal year 1999*. Washington, DC.

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