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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Wilderness area fees proposal

Dear Forest Service Planners,

Have you considered getting serious about designating and protecting more wild areas? A hundred years ago we had many more designated primitive areas and de facto wilderness areas, but pressure from industry and individuals foolishly cut the protections to much of these areas. We also had many more trails in 1950 than we have now. This decrease has been a big factor in creating the problem we now have with overuse and congestion. Road construction, logging and other activities by the Forest Service further eroded the small amount that was left. Now the mountain bike lobby and industry mobilizes to insure that no new areas are added to an already inadequate amount of protected areas. So you have created the problem which you are trying to solve by charging fees.

You are ignoring the fact that overuse is degrading to National Forests in other areas than just wilderness areas. The McKenzie River Trail in the Willamette National Forest, for instance, is unsafe for hiking in places due to people speeding on mountain bikes. The last time I hiked this trail 76 bikes passed me forcing me off the trail in the two miles that I walked. The elderly couple that I walked with had a difficult time walking on the trail due to erosion caused by the people on bikes. Many other non wilderness areas are suffering from the same problem. But why are you only proposing fees for the wilderness areas?

In my experience, the Wilderness Areas that are most impacted by overuse are not the back country areas but the day use trailheads. The back country areas with a few exceptions, especially along the Pacific Crest Trail, seem less used. Yet you are proposing steep fees especially for the back country overnight users. You are also setting up the wilderness areas for those who can afford to pay the fees. Imposition of fees might reduce the impact to the designated fee trailheads and camping areas, but you might be spreading the problem to nearby trailheads that don't have a problem now. Or people just won't use the trailheads but they will hike right over to the trails.

We have very few wilderness rangers today but implementation of this fee system will raise costs and more people will be needed to regulate it. I can see that in no time private enterprise will worm its way into profiting by the fees from the wilderness users, much like the campground management is now in the hands of contractors. We will end up with a nightmare that turns our inadequate wilderness system into a commercial enterprise, something that is forbidden by the Wilderness Act. In the future what is to stop the Forest Service from turning our wilderness areas into cash cows? Fees will likely rise and how high? I foresee the possibility in the future of a hike in the mountains being an expensive activity; five, ten or even twenty dollars per person which would be \$120 for a party of six.

No, I really don't like the proposed fee system as a solution to the nightmare problem that you have created. Better to put your effort into thinking how to restore some of those thousands of miles of trails in the Willamette National Forest alone that were destroyed or abandoned and adding areas like the Maiden Peak Wilderness and the Hardesty-Mount June wilderness and countless others to improve and grow the system we have now. More wilderness is the logical answer to the congestion, not increased fees.

Thank you for your consideration,

Gary Tepfer, Eugene Oregon