



## Recreation Fee Policy

### Overview

As the national voice for America's hikers, American Hiking Society promotes and protects foot trails and the hiking experience. American Hiking Society is committed to working cooperatively with Congress, land management agencies, and our members to address the proper role and application of user fees. Inherent in this spirit of cooperation is the position that the experience of hiking and the interest of hiking constituents must be protected.

In 2004, Congress passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) covering five federal agencies (National Park Service, USDA Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Reclamation) and providing a ten-year fee authorization. This law replaced the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo) created in 1996 as a three-year experiment and subsequently extended several times.

Provisions within the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act include:

- Altered fee structure to eliminate fees for primitive backcountry and wilderness recreation and charge fees only where there is a clear and demonstrable service.
- Creating a new national, interagency pass ("America the Beautiful" pass).
- Public notification and involvement procedures including creation of Recreation Resource Advisory Committees.
- Limitations on use of funds.
- Authority to recognize volunteers with passes.

### AHS Position

American Hiking Society supports recreation fees in concept, as they can provide much needed additional revenue to land managing agencies and have the potential to directly support recreation and hiking trails. Fees must not offset federal or state funding or result in reduced congressional appropriations for recreation management. Congress and the agencies must not consider fees a panacea to the current underfunding and understaffing of trails and other recreation management needs.

American Hiking Society supports the provisions in FLREA requiring retention of all fee revenues by the agencies, with at least 80% of fees retained at the site where they are collected, and the limitations on use of fees for administration and overhead.

Considerations for an effective fee program include the following:

- Fees should be fair and equitable. Agencies must set fees at levels that do not preclude lower income groups from visiting our public lands and correlate fee structure with cost or level of facility provided and/or impact created. For example, it may be appropriate to charge higher fees for certain high impact uses that can be demonstrated through scientific research or land manager assessment to result in significant resource damage or require greater levels of service. But, minimal fees, or no fees should be charged for uses that result in little or no impact to the resource or require only a limited administrative presence.
- Fee payment/collection should be convenient, and agencies should engage the public in fee policy development. The agencies should further explore options such as differential pricing (e.g. based on party size and/or length of stay) and retain free access and sites where feasible. Agencies should improve coordination efforts to reduce the multiplicity of fees within sites and encourage reciprocity of fees among adjacent sites/lands under the same or different jurisdictions.
- Agencies should improve accountability and evaluation procedures and ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness in fee program administration. Agencies should disclose information to the public about the criteria that will be applied to determine whether or not an individual fee program is successful or the program as a whole is successful, and should acknowledge instances where projects have failed. Long-term authorization should require that expenditures on administration be tightly monitored and limited in scope.
- Fees should not produce incentives for expansion of development-oriented activities and facilities. Agencies should not place greater emphasis on attracting visitors or constructing new facilities than protecting resources and preserving the natural elements of the hiking experience.
- Long term-authorization should include triggers for reducing fees over time at sites that regularly generate more revenue than is required for backlog needs on site.
- Any fee system should consider volunteers. Congress and/or agency decision makers should set guidelines to enhance the agencies' ability to partner with volunteers on maintenance, visitor services, and resource management projects and ensure volunteer contributions are recognized through provisions such as free seasonal, annual, or national passes for a given number of volunteer hours.
- Land agencies may use fee revenues to address maintenance, visitor services, resource management needs, and research to support these activities.
- Fees should not add a barrier to thru hiking long distance, multi-jurisdictional National Trails, such as (but not limited to) the Appalachian Trail, the North Country Trail and the Continental Divide Trail. For such hikers, consideration should be given to waiving the fees or at the least, a thru pass should be available at a nominal fee.
- Fees should not be a barrier to economically disadvantaged users. A provision should be instituted to insure all potential users and user groups are not precluded from access to public lands and an outdoor experience because of an inability or difficulty to pay user fees.

*Approved by AHS Board of Directors–October- 2013*