Nature for sale?: A closer look at the Fee Demonstration Program in Montana

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Nature for Sale?

A Closer Look at the Fee Demonstration Program in Montana

by

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Nature for Sale? A Closer Look at the Fee Demonstration Program in Montana

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Approved by Congress in 1996, the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program allows public land management agencies to charge fees for access to public lands or for use of outdoor recreation services and facilities, like campgrounds and visitor centers.

The user fee program was developed in part by President Ronald Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors in 1986. The American Recreation Coalition, made up of members ranging from hotel associations to camping equipment companies to motorized recreation industries, and other private recreation industry groups pushed Congress toward enacting the commission's recommendation, in the form of the recreation fee demonstration project.

With an increasing numbers of users, a continuing backlog of maintenance on public lands and a lack of appropriate funding from the government, Congress decided to try the program to find out if recreation fees could cover at least a part of the costs of recreation management.

Each agency — the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service — can select 100 fee demonstration projects. At the end of fiscal year 1999, 363 have been chosen.

One key difference between the fees collected at a fee demonstration site and fees collected in the past — at campgrounds, interpretive centers and other developed sites on public lands — is where the money ends up.

The fee demonstration program allows 80 percent of the money collected at a particular site to remain at that site. The remaining 20 percent is used at the agency's regional office. Money not collected under the fee demonstration program lands in the U.S. Treasury, and Congress distributes it across all government agencies.

Montana has few fee demonstration sites, however, the trend towards "pay-to-play" is growing strong and Montanans may see more fees on their public lands.

This series of stories found that while the fee demonstration program is controversial in several other states, residents of Montana are largely unaware of it. As a way of informing the state's public, these stories focused on critics' complaints that fees are expensive and misspent, that poor and middle-income residents are hardest hit by fees, that supporters of the program think it's the best way to deal with declining budgets and that Montana's legislators are hesitant about fees here.
# Table of Contents

- Price of Paradise? Controversial fees keep money local, but critics say they’re expensive and misspent  
  - 1

- Montanans less aware of fees than recreationists elsewhere  
  - 12

- Poor, middle-income residents hit hardest by fees: when choice is pay or leave, many choose the latter  
  - 19

- Critics say fees shut public out of forests, but some say it’s the best way to deal with declining budgets  
  - 24

- Montana legislators hesitant about fee demonstration program in their state  
  - 30

- Sources  
  - 33
Price of Paradise?
Controversial fees keep money local, but critics say they’re expensive and misspent

Last summer, Dudley Improta spent an extra $140 to float the main Salmon River in Idaho with his family. But the money didn’t buy him new equipment, fancy freeze-dried food or a night at a bed and breakfast.

Improta paid $5 per person per day to the U.S. Forest Service for the right to float down the river. He paid $20 each day for his family to camp in a pristine wilderness area and paddle impressive rapids.

The fees left a sour taste in his mouth.

“My wife’s a teacher and I’m a recreation professional, so we are not in the upper income bracket... (but) that’s 140 extra dollars that weren’t there before,” said Improta, manager of Outdoor Programs at the University of Montana. “It certainly has an impact. Now we came up with the money, but certain families won’t be able to come up with it.”

Not only is Improta, who applies every year for a river permit, worried that fees will prevent some people from floating down the Salmon River, but he is also concerned about where the fee money will be used. As someone who paddles his own raft down the river, Improta doesn’t want his fees to be used for services and amenities for jet boat outfitters, for example.

On Jan. 1, 1999, the designated wild sections of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River and the main Salmon River became one of several hundred sites across the country to charge fees under the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program.

Approved by Congress in 1996, the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program allows public land management agencies to charge fees for access to public lands or for use of outdoor recreation services and facilities, like campgrounds and visitor centers. Several fee demonstration sites are in Montana, however, the trend towards “pay-to-play” is growing strong and Montanans may see more fees like the ones on the Salmon River.
The user fee program was developed in part by President Ronald Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors in 1986. The American Recreation Coalition, made up of members ranging from hotel associations to camping equipment companies to motorized recreation industries, and other private recreation industry groups pushed Congress toward enacting the commission's recommendation, in the form of the recreation fee demonstration project.

With an increasing numbers of users, a continuing backlog of maintenance on public lands, and a lack of appropriate funding from the government, Congress decided to try the program to find out if recreation fees could cover at least a part of the costs of recreation management.

Each agency — the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service — can select 100 fee demonstration projects. At the end of fiscal year 1999, 363 have been chosen. Only the National Park Service has chosen 100 fee demonstration sites.

Most people who recreate frequently on public lands don't find recreation fees unusual. Before 1999, floaters on the Salmon River paid a $6 application fee to apply for a boating permit.

But one key difference between the fees collected at a fee demonstration site and fees collected in the past — at campgrounds, interpretive centers and other developed sites on public lands — is where the money ends up.

The fee demonstration program allows 80 percent of the money collected at a particular site to remain at that site. The remaining 20 percent is used at the agency's regional office.

Money not collected under the fee demonstration program lands in the U.S. Treasury, and Congress distributes it across all government agencies. For example, the $6 application fee for the Salmon River ended up in the U.S. Treasury before 1999, and managers never saw extra money if more people applied for float trips.
Because managers at the U.S. Forest Service's regional office in Ogden, Utah, decided to let 100 percent — instead of 80 percent — of the recreation fees on the Salmon River remain there, boaters who floated the river last summer helped to pay for maintenance and improvements on the Salmon River alone. Managers already spent $55,000 of a total $78,000 in application fees for a new computer lottery system to draw permits for floaters. In the future, river managers plan to spend some of the fee money on several other projects, such as providing garbage bags and river maps to each float party, smoothing and leveling the Indian Creek airstrip and improving the Salmon River Road, Boundary Creek Road and Vinegar Creek Road.

In other words, the $489,000 collected in recreation fees from floaters isn’t going to be used for improving roads in the national forests 200 miles north of the river or building toilets at a BLM trailhead in Maine. The users are spending money at the site where their money will end up.

"With fee demonstration, every nickel I collect here stays here," said Ken Stauffer, the recreation program manager for the Salmon-Challis National Forest, where the Salmon River is located. "Every nickel that I collect on the river from floaters will stay on the river for floaters."

But Improta doesn’t know why those nickels need to be spent on non-motorized floaters at all. After all, he explains, these floaters aren’t costing the Forest Service very much.

"This goes back to a philosophy that many of us have anyway, that minimum-impact recreationists usually get the brunt of the Forest Service’s wrath," Improta said. "Like building fire rings around the lake — they tell us don’t build fire rings around the lake because you are going to tear it up, or mess it up. Meanwhile, they are doing clearcuts right up next to the wilderness boundary and they are talking about putting mines up in the headwaters of the Blackfoot River. Is a fire ring really that big of a deal compared to some of these other things?"

The Salmon River’s use fee is a new fee — boaters were not charged for floating the river in the past; they were just charged the $6 application fee — but in many cases, fee demonstration sites are chosen where fees have been charged for years.
For example, the Forest Service has charged fees for years for cabin and lookout rentals. In 1998, 115 cabins and lookouts available for rental in Region 1 became fee demonstration sites.

“It’s not a new fee,” said Larry Timchak, who until recently was the developed recreation specialist for the Forest Service in Missoula. “We’ve been charging for cabin rentals for awhile. But this program gives us more flexibility to use the money.”

Unlike money appropriated by Congress, fee demonstration dollars are not designated to be spent in a particular year. Managers can save these funds, called “no year money,” for future projects. Recreation fees are also not intended to replace funds allocated by Congress.

The way the law is written now, managers can collect money until September 2001 and spend it through 2004.

**Floaters’ fees**

For Stauffer, the fees are part of the answer to a $1 million budget cut. Before fiscal year 1997, forest managers could determine and then request their own recreation and wilderness budget — about $3.5 million for the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

Now, recreation and wilderness budgets are determined according to a formula based on acres of national forest land, miles of trails and numbers of campgrounds, users and special use permits.

The formula didn’t favor the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

“The Challis and the Salmon are in the bottom five in terms of use,” said Stauffer. “We just don’t have big use numbers. So my budget went from $3.5 million to $2.5 million.”

Yet, the Salmon-Challis National Forest manages 5 million acres of national forest land, 3,167 miles of trails, 51 campgrounds and more than one-half of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, which spans 2.3 million acres. More than 100 campsites along the Middle
Fork of the Salmon River are also archeological sites filled with artifacts from the Shoshone-Bannock tribes.

The costs of basic maintenance in this remote area often can be high. It costs $30,000 annually to pump all the toilets. About $25,000 a year is spent to start up the forest’s campground water systems at the beginning of the camping season and test the water every month to make sure it is potable.

“Three and a half million dollars was not extravagant,” argued Stauffer. “I’ve lost seven permanent full-time employees in recreation over the last three years. I’ve cut all I can.”

But cuts still go on. Instead of employees, forest managers have looked at cutting overhead costs. BLM employees are moving into an expanded U.S. Forest Service office in Salmon sometime in September or October, and, if all goes as planned, overhead costs for rent and utilities will decrease.

Even with fewer employees and less workspace, Stauffer said he needed to look at the fee demonstration program as a way to stabilize funding. Forest managers studied the entire Salmon-Challis National Forest to determine places with the highest visitor rate, the highest management costs and the simplest collection mechanism.

The answer: the Middle Fork of the Salmon River and the main Salmon River.

“If we were to try to have, say, an entrance fee in the Salmon National Forest, it never would get off the ground in Salmon, Idaho,” Stauffer said. “And here in the office, we didn’t like that notion either. We asked, ‘Where do we spend a lot of money?’ and ‘Where do we have a lot of high management costs?’ The answer was the river corridors.”

Almost 10,000 people a year float the Middle Fork and 8,000 float the main Salmon River.

Forest managers spend about $400,000 a year managing these two rivers. Just the wages for permit checkers at the launch sites, patrollers along the river and maintenance workers costs
about $254,000. Another $75,000 is spent on supplies, such as radios, safety and first aid
equipment, and material for maintenance of docks and roads. Vehicles and fuel costs the forest
almost $16,000. The remaining $55,000 is contributed to the river corridors by the Nez Perce
National Forest, which helps to manage the lower portions of the river.

The river corridors also offered the simplest collection mechanism. Managers didn’t need
to hire a new fee collector to sit in a hut at the launch sites and collect fees.

Anyone interested in obtaining a private permit to float the Middle Fork or the main
Salmon River must submit $6 and an application with four different launch dates and four river
choices. Of 13,000 applications, 700 private boaters are chosen from a random lottery. In the
packet of material that informs a “lucky winner” of their launch date, material is included
explaining the recreation fees and asking for payment two weeks before the trip. The boater can
either mail in the money or pay by credit card over the telephone.

Fee collection from the river outfitters is just as easy. Outfitters include the recreation
fees in the total cost of their trip. For example, a floater who booked a trip with Warren River
Expeditions, Inc. pays $1,330 for a six-day float, two nights in a lodge and a ride back upstream
in a jet boat. Included is a 5 percent Idaho sales tax of $66.50, a 3 percent Forest Service
franchise fee of $39.90 and now a $5 per person per day recreation fee of $30.

The Forest Service franchise fee is a fee paid by the outfitter for the privilege of making
money on public land. Most outfitters simply pass this fee, and now the recreation fees, onto their
clients.

“I like the idea of pay-to-play on national forests,” said Dave Warren, who operates
Warren River Expeditions, Inc. out of Salmon, Idaho. “But my commercial clients already pay
the 3 percent Forest Service franchise fee. They should take the 3 percent fee under fee demo
instead of the $5 per day for outfitters’ clients. That is the outfitters’ preference across the board.”
Money management

Under the fee demonstration program for the Salmon River, the Salmon-Challis National Forest keeps all of the $5 per person per day recreation fee as well as the $6 application fee.

Stauffer and his staff decided not to spend any fee demonstration money on overhead costs, administrative costs or permanent full-time employees, even though the bill authorizing fee demonstration doesn’t prevent managers from using fees for overhead costs or administrative costs.

"We decided we don’t want to hire a bunch of cops intimidating visitors over some silly fee," Stauffer explained. "So we decided no money on law enforcement. We don’t want the fee money to replace allocated money."

Last year, forest managers spent $55,000 of the $78,000 collected in application fees for a new lottery system on their computers.

And about $350,000 of the $489,000 collected in recreation fees last year has already been designated for projects on the river. Managers plan to hire Indian interpreters for Boundary Creek and Corn Creek — the put-ins for the Middle Fork and main Salmon River — to educate visitors about the spiritual nature of the canyon for the Shoshone-Bannock tribes. The Carey Creek and Vinegar Creek boat ramps will be expanded, the Stoddard trailhead and boating site will be improved and the Indian Creek composting toilet will be replaced.

Forest managers estimate that the recreation fees collected until 2001 on the two river corridors will bring in $1.5 million to the forest.

An ad hoc committee of citizens — from private boaters to land owners along the corridor — has been organized to determine project priorities for the estimated revenue. The ad hoc group chose 11 high priority projects, including the maintenance of river access points for $225,000, pilot weed patrol work for two years for $150,000, Riggins garbage collection for $4,000 a year, launching facilities improvement at Boundary Creek for $150,000, Vinegar Creek...
parking area expansion for $40,000, campsite and cultural site restoration for $30,000 a year, protection of the Loon Creek hot springs for $5,000 and stabilization of the Earl Parrott cabin for $5,000.

River runners' reactions

With the implementation of the recreation fee demonstration program on the Salmon River, Stauffer braced himself for visitor reactions — phone calls, letters and faxes. But it hasn't come.

"Personally, I am shocked at the lack of reaction," Stauffer said. "In three years time, I have contacted close to 90,000 people. Out of those contacted, we have received 179 responses."

Stauffer has been able to contact so many people because in every application packet is a self-addressed customer comment card. Newspaper stories and public meetings have also informed the public about the program.

More than half of the 179 responses were in support of the program and 19 of those wanted the fee to remain on the river corridor and national forest. Several people wanted all forest users to be charged a fee, not just the floaters.

"The new day-use fees of $5 per day are acceptable as long as all recreational users are charged," wrote a resident of Boise, Idaho, "such as backpacking, hunters, fly-ins using back country air strips, etc."

More than 18 percent of those who were in favor of the program thought the fees were too high.

"I don't agree with the amounts that are proposed for the Middle Fork System," wrote a river user from Hailey, Idaho. "This is quickly becoming a rich-man-only recreation."

Of the 86 respondents who were opposed to the fees, 12 percent thought the fees were double taxation or a selective tax.
“Concerning the proposed fees to use public lands and rivers, I say absolutely not,” wrote a resident of Middleton, Idaho. “We, as taxpayers, are taxed to the breaking point as it is. We shouldn’t have to pay extra money to take a hike or hunt on our lands.”

Other opponents expressed more far-reaching concerns.

“I am very disappointed in you,” wrote a river runner from Burley, Idaho. “It seems there are no governmental agencies that are free from corruption any more. It saddens me that you have the power to take away the beauty and splendor of God’s handiwork on the Main and Middle Fork of the Salmon Rivers just out of reach for people with low to moderate incomes.”

In Missoula, floater Charlie Stevenson said that it will be hard to convince Westerners to pay for use of public lands.

“Hey, in the West it is your God-given right to recreate for free,” said Stevenson, who applies for a Salmon River permit every year. “It’s just the way it has been. It’s not something people want to give up freely.”

And yet many other rafters, kayakers and outfitters have expressed support for the program, mainly because the money stays on the Salmon River.

“User fees are a fairly benign sort of thing,” said Missoulian Lane Coddington, a kayaker and rafter of the Middle Fork. “The fees are going to something you directly care about.”

Coddington said that the $35 recreation fee per person for a seven-day trip is a drop in the bucket compared to the amount paid for gear, shuttles, a night in a lodge and food. Last year, a trip with a group of his friends cost each person just under $300 including the recreation fee.

“In our group, nobody complained about it,” Coddington said. “It was an extra $35. We know the fee is going directly to something we care about and that’s better than most kinds of taxes we pay.”
Outfitters say much the same thing. The Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association, which represents the majority of the businesses in the state, supports the fee demonstration program on the Salmon River.

River guides use the roads to the put-ins and take-outs dozens of times a year. They deal with weeds at the campsites throughout the summer. They like the idea of extra money returning to the resource.

And they aren't worried that the fee will reduce business.

"My commercial clients never batted an eye," said Dave Warren of Warren River Expeditions, Inc. in Salmon. "Once I explained that it went back to the resource, they thought it was a good thing."

However, the very fact that recreation fees end up back at the site is a concern for some people. Opponents of fee demonstration argue that forest managers will be forced to become businessmen, vying for customers by spending the recreation fees on bigger and bigger facilities. After all, the site that draws the most visitors collects the most money.

That's why Improta is disgruntled. It's exactly how the money is spent that worries him. The recreation fee money is slated for the Salmon River, but the projects may not match Improta's wishes.

"If you take a raft or a kayak or a canoe down that river, you sleep on sand and you pack everything out including your feces," said Improta. "Now what are they going to use my $5 for? Jet boat ramps? Nothing [they spend my money on] is going to make that experience better for me as a non-motorized recreationist.

"So don't get me wrong, charge these Winnebagos that need pump stations. Or the jet boat launch — charge them for that kind of thing. But the backpacker? I don't know. The backpacking fees aren't going to go to enhance the backpacking experience. They are going to go to enhance the car camping experience."

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Improta believes that non-motorized recreationists have a minimal impact on a resource and therefore, shouldn’t have to pay to use that resource, especially in light of the Forest Service’s other practices — like mining, grazing and logging.

“If you count four-wheeling or logging, mining, road building — backpacking with a backpack stove and floating down a river with a human-powered craft is the least impact to our lands,” he said. “I just don’t think that it’s right to hit up these minimum-impact recreationists.”

But Improta also sees people losing access to these lands because they can’t afford to pay the fees. And with the loss of access comes an apathetic attitude.

“I’m concerned recreation will become money driven… where only the wealthy people do the outdoor recreation,” he said. “If we limit who can use the Blackfoot River, are we going to lose the large constituency who is fighting the gold mine up river? I think it becomes less important to me if I can’t use it.”
Montanans less aware of fees than recreationists elsewhere

On the National Bison Range in Moiese, Mont., visitors can’t see that managers have taken an entirely new approach to public land management.

The bison still roam in large herds within the park, vehicles can still travel the road that winds around the hills, and visitors still pay a $4 fee per vehicle.

But since August 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has managed the bison range under the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, a pilot project approved by Congress that allows federal land agencies to keep a majority of the money they collect at a site instead of returning the funds to the U.S. Treasury. The program represents a new philosophy for managing public lands.

Despite this substantial change in policy over public lands, Montanans remain relatively unaware of the program, even as their neighbors in Idaho, Oregon and Washington engage in discussions about the program. Montanans haven’t heard of the demonstration because most of the sites in Montana are just like the Bison Range — without any visible changes.

Those who are familiar with the program though, worry about the lack of awareness. They worry that Montana will be left out of the demonstration program and then get hit with a permanent user fee system.

“They aren’t going to test fee demonstration in Montana because people would be furious,” said Bethanie Walder, executive director of Wildlands Center for Preventing Roads in Missoula. “And the point of the demonstration program is to show, truefully or not, that the public accepts paying fees on national forests ... Once Congress makes fee demonstration a permanent reality, they are likely to implement it on national forests everywhere, and we won’t have anything to say because it won’t be a demonstration program anymore.”
For folks in other parts of the country, the fee demonstration program is commonly mentioned and discussed in newspapers, magazines and at recreation sites. Especially for people in the Pacific Northwest, recreation fees are now charged on many of the most popular trails, rivers and other recreation areas.

In Oregon, the Bureau of Land Management charges fees at 19 sites under the fee demonstration program. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved six national wildlife refuges for the program in Washington alone. In Region 6 of the U.S. Forest Service, the Pacific Northwest, 12 projects were chosen for recreation fees under the demonstration.

"It has not been a real visible program in the state [Montana] because we have not had the controversy," said Larry Timchak, who until recently was the U.S. Forest Service developed recreation specialist for Region 1. "We issue these reports and press releases a couple times a year. We have comment cards at sites. We sign sites with "Fees at Work." We publicize, but we are not in the business of lobbying."

But in a state so involved in outdoor recreation, the fee demonstration program could have lasting implications for the future. So, why are recreation fees such a non-issue in Montana?

For one, Montanans have not been exposed to as many fee demo sites as their neighbors in Idaho, Oregon and Washington have. Secondly, the majority of fee demonstration sites in Montana are developed sites — places where people expect to pay fees, such as cabin rentals and campgrounds. Moreover, many of the fee demonstration sites and programs across Montana charged fees in the past, making it difficult for visitors to notice any changes.

Region 1 of the U.S. Forest Service, which includes Montana and northern Idaho, has selected seven programs under fee demonstration. Only two regions chose fewer sites than Region 1 — Regions 2 and 10, the Rocky Mountain region and the Alaska region, each chose 5 projects. The other regions chose between seven and 14 projects.
The regional recreation lodging program, approved for the fee demonstration program in 1998, includes 115 Forest Service cabins and lookouts available for rental by the public. Ever since these shelters were available for rental, people have paid a fee. Under the fee demonstration program, certain forests, such as the Gallatin National Forest, have raised the fee by $5 per night. Other forests have left the rental price alone.

Either way, renters have almost no way of knowing about the fee demonstration program unless there is a small sign inside the cabin that mentions the fee demonstration program or a Forest Service employee happens to mention it while taking cabin reservations.

A similar program involving more than 160 campgrounds across the region was approved for fee demonstration in 1998. According to Timchak, about 90 percent of the campgrounds have charged fees in the past.

At Lake Como in the Bitterroot National Forest, a $2 day-use fee, implemented in 1997, provides access to boat ramps, beaches, trailheads and picnic areas. Visitors drop their $2 into "iron rangers," metal boxes located near informational signs. Everyone who parks at Lake Como must pay the fee, whether they plan on launching a boat from the boat ramp or throwing on a backpack and hiking up a trail.

The Lake Como fee is unique in Montana because, for some visitors, it is an access fee — a fee to get onto public land for a hike or for use of the beach. No other sites in Montana charge access fees. Of course, for visitors who use the boat ramp, the $2 fee covers an amenity rather than solely access.

Still, some visitors are not happy about the new fee.

"I don't visit it anymore because of the fee," said Todd Sherwood of Victor, Mont. "Most of the people I know are like me — they basically boycotted the lake."
Under the Bureau of Land Management, which manages 8.1 million acres in Montana, three fee demo sites were chosen — Kipp Recreation Area near Lewistown, Holter Lake Recreation Area near Helena and Pompeys Pillar near Billings.

Each of the three sites charged fees in the past and, for the most part, fees remain the same. The Holter Lake Recreation Area has an increased overnight camping fee, but according to BLM outdoor recreation planner George Peternel, “that would have happened anyway.”

Near Missoula, Garnet Ghost Town and Thibodeau campground on the Blackfoot River should become fee demonstration sites this summer. When Garnet Ghost Town becomes a fee demo site, the $2 per person fee, which has been in place for almost six years, remains the same. When Thibodeau campground becomes a fee demonstration site this summer, it will be the third consecutive year that the campground cost $5 per night.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service charges recreation fees at one site in Montana — the National Bison Range in Moiese. Visitors have paid $4 a day to drive the range since 1994, two years before it became fee demo.

Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park, just like 98 other national parks, are fee demonstration sites. Glacier National Park doubled its entrance fee from $5 per vehicle to $10. An annual park pass went from $15 to $20. Also, visitors who plan to backpack in Glacier can expect a new fee — a $4 per person per night backcountry reservation fee.

The lack of fee demo sites in Montana is no mystery. Montanans have seen fewer fee sites because the program is difficult to implement here.

“Our region is very dispersed,” Timchak said. “We don’t have concentrated population centers. Our trailheads are pretty spread out. It’s not like Seattle or Washington or Oregon where you have a lot of people concentrated in certain places.”

But it’s not simply a dispersed population that causes problems for fee collection. An abundance of undeveloped outdoor recreation sites are available to Montanans, no matter where
they live. And few recreation areas are overwhelmed with visitors, even at the height of the vacation season.

A Missoulian looking for a day hike can choose from more than 40 hikes just south of Missoula in the Bitterroot Mountains and spend the entire day without seeing another person. A runner seeking a trail closer to Missoula can hit the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area, Pattee Canyon Recreation Area, Blue Mountain Recreation Area, the Clark Fork River trail or the trail to the peace sign on Waterworks Hill.

Charging fees at undeveloped sites would not be cost-effective or easy to enforce. According to Timchak, Region I forest managers may begin looking at a few more day-use sites similar to Como Lake, but will probably leave the trailheads alone.

“I think there is more acceptance on the developed end of the spectrum,” he said. “Nobody is arguing that you should be able to rent a cabin for free. Very few people argue that you should be able to use a campground for free. A lot of people argue that you shouldn’t have to pay a fee to hike a trail.”

It’s not just the Forest Service that is backing away from fees at undeveloped sites in Montana. BLM managers have so far drawn the line at charging fees for places with no amenities, facilities or services.

When Dick Fichtler, the outdoor recreation planner for BLM land around Missoula, chooses sites for the fee demonstration program, he checks the budget sheets to find out how much the agency invested in the site.

“Obviously, a trailhead with minimal investment and minimum maintenance — that’s a tough one to sell to the public,” Fichtler said. “Why are we paying a fee for that?”

Because Garnet Ghost Town and Thibodeau campground are the only two sites in his area with a significant capital expenditure, Fichtler doesn’t foresee any new sites around Missoula.
"I do not anticipate any more fee demo sites," he said. "I do not have a highly developed recreation program. I just don’t have the sites. I’m not going to plop down fees on this trailhead or that trailhead just to generate fees. My sense is that the reason the public supports things like the Garnet Ghost Town fee area is that they can see that the fees are being used right on site and they support what the fees are being used for."

Besides the fact that fee demo may be difficult to implement in Montana, a lack of sites here could simply mean that managers are waiting to see how the program goes over in other parts of the country. Just as the name implies, the program was intended to test the fee program. As a pilot project, it was never intended to cover every recreation site in every region.

"Keep in mind that we are dealing with a demonstration program and Congress has said try new things," said Timchak. "Each agency is trying new things that best meet their needs. We weren’t told to go and do a trailhead fee, nor was Region 6 [Pacific Northwest]. Obviously, they thought there was a lot of need with trails and backcountry and that the revenue would help them do a better job. The whole idea is to learn. We aren’t sure how it is going to end up."

Yet another theory exists about why Montanans don’t often see fee demonstration sites. No one wants to test a federally run, user-pays approach in a place notorious for its resentment and distrust of the federal government. No one wants to test fee demonstration in a place where people historically have used public lands for free.

When asked about why so few sites in Montana were chosen, Linda Feldman, the fee demonstration manager in Wash., D.C., said it was intentional. "Each region has a different flavor — different kinds of constituents and visitors," she explained. "So, in Montana, the folks who are managing the program have been pretty cautious."

Former U.S. Rep. Pat Williams, who is now a senior fellow at the University of Montana’s O’Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West, explains why local managers may have been cautious.
"The native people of the Rockies, who have a lifestyle of using the outdoors, will be the ones who will literally never be comfortable with fees," he said. "So acceptance [of fees] depends upon population growth and where the people are moving from. The Congress and the administration have recognized that it will take a new West to accept fees. The old West, and maybe the West we still live in today, will not accept them without a struggle."
Woody Baxter misses some of the families he used to see at campsites along the Blackfoot River every summer.

In particular, he remembers one family that used to camp several times during the summer. Since Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks implemented a fee at the sites in 1997, the family hasn't been back.

“I don't see them anymore and they used to camp here all the time,” said Baxter, the recreation manager on the Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor. “I know that they can’t pay the fee.”

Only one campsite — Thibodeau — along the Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor charges fees under the federal Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, which allows public land agencies to charge fees for access to public lands or for use of outdoor recreation facilities. Under this program, most of the money collected at a campground, for example, is used at the campground — instead of going directly into the U.S. Treasury.

The fees — now $5 a night with a fishing license and $10 without a license — at the other campsites along the river are state fees.

But to a family who can’t afford the camping fees, it doesn’t matter who is collecting the money.

“It really made a difference on that economic bracket,” Baxter said. “At Johnsrud — it’s 16 miles from the center of Missoula — kids and big families don’t come here as much.”

In other national forests around the state, visitors have mentioned that fees eliminate low-income users.

“We are appalled at the high cost of camping,” wrote a camper on a comment card in a national forest in Montana. “Only the affluent can do so — We saw no ‘poor families’ at the
campsites. We are denying poor people the joy of the outdoors in the name of an ever-growing bureaucracy. Our children learned love of the outdoors and respect through camping on free land areas — not "fee" areas!

With the recent implementation of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program has come a flurry of studies about recreation fees. Of course, social scientists have studied recreation fees for years to determine their impact on users, but the fee demonstration program has allowed hundreds of new recreation fees, making the question of impact a more serious one.

Raising the price of recreation will affect the working class, argues Thomas More, a social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service’s Northeastern Research Station.

"It will be among the working class — the people at the margin — where the impacts will weigh most heavily," he wrote in a paper published in the 1999 Journal of Leisure Research. "These people are neither poor, nor immobile. They do, however, live with constant economic and financial anxiety. These are the people who are most dependent on low-cost, public-sector recreation; they are the ones who must decide between spending $15 for an extra night's camping or putting it toward a new pair of school shoes."

In a telephone interview, More said that there is always someone at the margin, someone who is not poor but who can’t afford recreation fees.

In many places, particularly large cities and areas without much public land, poor people are not affected as much by recreation fees. Poor people in large cities may not have the means to travel to public land — transportation costs are often very high, and the time commitment can be too much.

However, the story is much different in Montana. Poor people in Montana — 130,754 people of all ages are living in poverty in this state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — are often very close to public land, and less than 50 percent of Montana’s population is located in
metropolitan cities. Until last year, when Missoula was classified as a metro area, Montana was dead last among all states in terms of percentage of its population living in metro areas.

"Many poor people live within close proximity to national forests and can easily walk to them or access them by truck, ATV, horseback or even bicycle," wrote Jill Belsky, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Montana, in an e-mail interview. "Low-income people routinely enter the national forests to cut firewood, hunt or gather berries or mushrooms for home or market. While there are, of course, commercial gatherers involved in some of these activities, many of these and other forest products provide important sources of household food and/or income."

In a new study, to be published in the Journal of Leisure Research in the fall, More and Tom Stevens of the University of Massachusetts found that 23 percent of low-income users either reduced use or went elsewhere as a result of the fee increases in New Hampshire and Vermont. That is compared to about 11 percent of high-income users.

"On every question and in every way, low-income people were harder hit than high-income," More said about the study results. "The effects were clear and consistent and powerful. We figured that a $5 fee would negatively affect about 49 percent of low-income people."

Other studies have shown that local people — the people closest to public lands — are hardest hit by recreation fees. They are the ones who use the land the most.

In Montana, there are approximately 882,779 people spread out across 94.1 million acres — almost 30 million of which are public lands.

"People who live locally have a strong attachment to the land," said Alan Watson, a social scientist with the Aldo Leopold Research Institute in Missoula. "They are more influenced by the fee program. We are changing their relationship with that place."

When Glacier National Park increased its day fee from $5 to $10 per vehicle, survey results showed that visitors to the park were generally happy with the fees. However, no one
surveyed the people who didn’t go the park because of the increased price. In fact, according to a 16-day study at Glacier National Park in 1997, more than 100 cars turned around and left the entrance without ever paying the increased fee or commenting on the program.

"The Park Service has made a claim that the fees would have greater negative effects on local populations," said More. "Coming from the East, the Glacier Park fees are just a small portion of my trip."

So, what happens to the people who turn around at a national park or forest when they see a recreation fee?

"My knowledge of places elsewhere in the world which have raised the costs of people's access to forests have led to a number of responses — finding ways to avoid payment (coming at night and leaving early), shifting use to other areas that do not require fees, and/or reducing further their trust or sense of legitimacy in our federal government and land management agencies," Belsky wrote.

But, according to Don Leal of the Political Economy Research Center in Bozeman, there are ways to accommodate low-income users.

"How do movie theaters include students?" he asked. "You get a student discount. We can do the same thing on public lands."

Leal suggested charging higher fees on the weekends and holidays, when the use is high, and charging lower fees at the times when use is low.

"There seems to be a one-size-fits-all approach to fees," he said. "But we can charge higher prices at more utilized parks."

Free days and volunteer programs have also been used to accommodate low-income users. At the Lewis and Clark National Historical Trail Interpretive Center four free winter days were offered in 1999, and eight free winter days will be offered in 2000. Free outdoor interpretive
programs, such as demonstrations along the Missouri River, are offered daily during the summer months.

U.S. Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash., introduced a bill in August 1999 to reward individuals who volunteered on public lands for 50 hours or more with an annual pass to some parks or forests.

But social scientist More says that these special programs are a way to “soothe the conscience of the agencies.”

Low-income users probably don’t have time to volunteer for access to land — especially at a rate of 50 hours for a $20 pass. Many people hold two jobs, and work odd hours. Only upper-income people can afford to volunteer and take time off, he said.

“A free Tuesday isn’t going to help,” More said. “A free weekend day would, but that’s when the agency wants to charge fees to collect the maximum revenue.”

More wants public land agencies to define their goals. Recreation fees create an incentive to look at cash balances, visitor rates and revenue generation, More said.

“Clearly, you have to have a sense of what you are trying to provide and why,” he said. “That is the big thing that is missing from the public recreation estate — who are we serving and why?

“When the state parks agencies play entrepreneur — charging fees that eliminate low-income users — the very reason for having public ownership is lost. It defeats the reason for having it.”
Critics say fees shut public out of forests
But some say it's the best way to deal with declining budgets

If Pat Williams is correct, Montanans will debate the levying of recreation fees on public lands in much the same way as have folks in the rest of the country — passionately.

"One of the great outcries and debates in contemporary western history will occur if the federal government seriously considers charging people money to use their own land, their own property," said Williams, a former congressman and now a senior fellow at the University of Montana's O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West. "People will erupt. There will be both support and opposition, of course, but there will be an eruption."

In the Pacific Northwest — where recreation fees are being tested at dozens of sites — an eruption has already occurred.

Scott Silver is a leader in the protest against the recreation fee demonstration. In 1990, he started Wild Wilderness, a Bend, Ore., group committed to the protection and enhancement of recreational activities dependent on wilderness values, such as solitude. In 1997, he took up the fight against the fee program, which he sees as the commercialization, privatization and motorization of public lands.

"America's public lands belong to its people," Silver testified before a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Government Reform and Oversight on July 9, 1998. "We are the owners of these lands, not customers as we are now referred to with increasing frequency. Nature must not be converted into just another commodity, which can be marketed to paying customers. Nature is far too valuable for numerous ecological, spiritual and recreational purposes to be managed in the way currently proposed."

Others have followed Silver's lead, affixing bumper stickers to their cars that complain that the public "Can't see the forest for the fees." Fee payment stickers, often placed in windshields of vehicles, are now replaced with "No Fees" stickers. A campaign to boycott the
"Adventure Pass," which allows holders to use many different public lands, has a growing number of supporters. And last year's first national day of protest, Aug. 14, 1999, drew hundreds of people to different locations around the country to fight forest fees.

With all of the vocal criticisms and visible protests over fee demonstration, it's hard to keep track of support for the program. But according to a recent study of news media from Jan. 1, 1996 to Sept. 20, 1999, support for the recreation fee demonstration program outweighed opposition by 2 to 1. The authors, David Bengston of the U.S. Forest Service's North Central Research Station and David Fan of InfoTrend Inc., explained that the arguments in support of the program were based on utilitarian and pragmatic arguments, such as fees will fund improvements to the land and the fees are needed because of declining budgets.

"The most frequently expressed (belief) was that fees will result in on-the-ground improvements to recreation areas and therefore tangible benefits to recreationists," the authors stated in the report released in March.

The support for the fees, however, is conditional.

"Most people appear willing to pay the fees — and some are even happy to pay them — so long as the revenue that is collected is used locally to fund needed improvements in recreation areas and facilities," the authors wrote.

However, they explained that the arguments in opposition to the program were about fairness and often expressed a deeply held belief that free access to public lands is a birthright of all Americans.

"Although expressions of beliefs that support a favorable attitude ... outnumbered expressions of unfavorable beliefs by about 2 to 1 in our database, the unfavorable beliefs are often based on more deeply held values and convictions," the authors wrote. "Claims based on rights, fairness, and spiritual arguments tend to be held with greater intensity and depth of emotion than claims based on utilitarian and pragmatic arguments."
The criticisms over user fees in the Pacific Northwest have often focused on these deeply held values and convictions.

For decades, the federal government has subsidized logging, mining and grazing on public lands. Recreation has never been the top priority use for most public lands. Now that these extractive industries are on the decline, some people argue that public land agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service, are trying to stay in business by selling recreation.

"Agencies see a future in recreation," said George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch in Missoula. "Just you going out and hiking in a forest is not going to save 30,000 Forest Service jobs. They need something to replace the old commodities."

But many people don't want government agencies acting like businesses, making customers out of visitors.

In a 1996 article in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, Thomas A. More, a social scientist with the Forest Service's Northeastern Research Station in Burlington, Vt., explained that the user-fee system has the potential to create a spiral of development that is at odds with the fundamental goals of wildness management and preservation.

As expectations of public land "customers" increase because of fees, fees may need to increase to accommodate those increased expectations, he wrote. As prices increase and new fees are added in places that were previously free, the public is more inclined to ask what is it getting for its money. Agencies will be pressed to show the public, by way of development, how the funds were used.

But according to Don Leal, a senior associate with the Bozeman-based Political Economy Research Center (PERC), public land managers tend to over-develop when their budgets are appropriated from Congress.

"Agencies, of course, want to expand their budgets," Leal said. "They will take on projects if Congress will give them money. Then the money gets spent on political pet projects."
Leal said that state parks are leading the way toward self-sufficiency — the same way that federal public lands should go — without sacrificing natural resource protection.

"When parks are supported by fees, I think there is more latitude for management to pay more attention to environmental and natural resource issues," Leal said.

Brazos Bend State Park in Texas has been innovative in protecting resources now that the state park system is completely self-sufficient, he said. In a PERC report, the authors state, "Park managers quickly became innovative in providing services to park visitors and in protecting resources. For example, visitors ... can enjoy a two-hour nocturnal "owl prowl" for $3 per person or watch alligators from a pontoon boat for $8 per person... . Though fee generation has become a priority, resource protection is still critical. The additional money generated at Brazos Bend State Park helped pay for a plant shredder to create small openings for wildlife in dense areas of vegetation."

Silver and his group, Wild Wilderness, firmly believe that the fee demonstration program is the vehicle for more development. They see this increased development and focus on revenue generation as the next step toward privatization. In fact, Congress has encouraged public land managers to create partnerships with private industry "to enhance recreational experiences on public lands."

The American Recreation Coalition, for example, has an advisory position on the National Forest Foundation. Members of the American Recreation Coalition include jet-ski, RV and snowmobile manufacturers, sporting equipment manufacturers, ski area associations and the Walt Disney Co.

"The National Forest Foundation, created by U.S. Congress, is the official non-profit partner of the U.S. Forest Service," according to the National Forest Foundation Web site. "The foundation attracts corporate sponsors, other foundations and individuals with the incentive of matching funds that are made available from Congress. In addition, the foundation is soliciting
funds from the private sector to match the challenge cost-share program of the U.S. Forest Service.”

Silver doesn’t like the sound of the private recreation industry matching funds with public land agencies.

“Unless we halt the rush toward public/private partnerships for the management of our public lands, the ‘great outdoors’ will soon be little more than a series of highly structured, ‘ecotainment’ theme parks,” Silver wrote for his Web site, www.wildwilderness.org. “Through the growing use of corporate-sponsored ‘educational interpretation’ and similar ‘visitor services,’ our public lands themselves will become the final vehicle through which our concepts of nature will be defined and redefined to advance the agenda of Corporate America.”

In Silver’s estimation, fee demonstration was designed more for the creation of these public-private partnerships than for funds to maintain trails and outhouses.

“The economy of the U.S. is strong — it is incredibly strong,” he said. “Fee demonstration, even in its wildest expectations, is not going to contribute more than $50 million. Fee demo is not about the money.”

In Montana, with few fee demonstration sites currently and the prospect of very few in the future, Silver’s fears may not be justified.

But new land managers with different management views can replace the current managers, changing the way the fee demonstration program is implemented in the state. Or declines in recreation budgets could force managers to look at recreation fees to maintain funding.

Faced with difficulties in implementing many new sites, managers might look at more innovative fee systems — such as recreation passes that allowed access to a variety of public lands.
A recreation pass is already in place in the Pacific Northwest. In March, the U.S. Forest Service announced its new $30 annual pass for all 19 national forests in Oregon and Washington. The passes will be sold at ranger stations, retail stores, and over the Internet and telephone. Forest visitors can also purchase the Oregon Coast pass — a $35 annual pass good for the Siuslaw National Forest, BLM sites and state parks along the central coast of Oregon.

Alan Brown, president of the Montana Snowmobile Association, which represents just under 9,000 people in the state, supports a recreation pass. He wants other user groups to pay for their use of public lands just like snowmobilers do, but he also wants an easy system.

"I can see a hiking permit or a card that you put in your wallet and then you are done for the year," he said. "I think it is very foolish to try to collect on a per-day basis except to control places like Yellowstone. I think if we did it correctly, we would just have a recreation fee. I don't like the idea of 10,000 Forest Service employees running around collecting fees. I don't think that is very functional."

However, a recreation pass, though it may be an easier program to administer, does not truly meet the intent of the fee demonstration program. Silver was quoted as saying in The Register-Guard in Eugene. The program was set up to bring money directly to the site where the money was collected. With a recreation pass, the money is distributed across the public lands that accept the pass.

Without going into the details of the recreation fee program, Nickas of Wilderness Watch points to a more fundamental argument against user fees — the fact that the public owns these lands.

"One of the things that makes our lands unique is that they belong to the people," Nickas said. "As long as these are public lands, everyone pays and everyone is an equal stakeholder. Ultimately, user fees diminish our sense of ownership. The more you try to bring lands into the free market, the more you will see lands go to the highest bidder."
Montana legislators hesitant about fee demonstration program in their state

State Rep. Bob Raney doesn't mince words about the federal fee demonstration program. "The federal fee demo program is nothing more than a larger size Montana fee enactment program," Raney wrote in an e-mail interview. "Its purpose is to further the needs of a government workforce while assisting private recreational enterprise in eliminating free access and free use of public land and waters."

The federal fee demonstration program allows public land agencies to charge fees for the use of public lands. Under the program, the majority of the money collected at the site remains at the site instead of going into the U.S. Treasury.

Raney, D-Livingston, believes that Montanans have a unique relationship with public lands, and the fee program disrupts that relationship.

"We believe that public land and water belong to us, that we should have free access to them and that it should be left natural (otherwise there is no nature to visit)," Raney wrote. "[Fees] defy our Montana values of free access to public land, our intense distaste for government renting our own lands back to us and agencies marketing them off to people who can afford the fees or do not object to the fees."

Not only does Raney believe that Montanans want their lands free, but he also says that Montanans want their lands to remain natural. He says that the program encourages over-development of public lands.

Raney points to three pieces of legislation as evidence that state legislators are listening to Montanans.

The Primitive Parks Act of 1993 sets aside 15 of the state's 41 parks as primitive. Under that designation, primitive parks can not be developed, except for minimal improvements such as
new trails or those required to meet public safety rules. The act also allows Montana residents to enter all but two of the primitive parks for free.

The Good Neighbor Policy prohibits public recreational lands from impacting surrounding private or public lands with weeds, noise, litter and erosion. Furthermore, the Montana legislature required that Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks place maintenance of existing facilities as a priority over development at all state parks and fishing access sites.

The Primitive Fishing Access Site rules require public meetings and comments whenever improvements or developments are proposed at fishing access sites. The department must prepare a public report that includes environmental impacts, long-range maintenance and desires of the public for the proposed improvement.

State legislators from both parties are hesitant about increasing or creating new recreation fees in Montana. Rep. John Witt, R-Carter, said that he is not opposed to fees, but he wants a limited number of fees and he wants agencies to be accountable.

"I would hate to see every access point on the Missouri and Yellowstone have access fees," he said. "If it got to the point where everyone had to pay $2 to $3 at every access site, I'd be opposed to that."

Other states have gone even further than enacting laws that affect state lands. In November 1998, the California general assembly and the senate voted unanimously on a resolution to repeal the fee demonstration program on national forest land.

But both of Montana's U.S. senators have received very few comments from Montanans about the federal fee demonstration program.

Even without many comments, U.S. Sen. Max Baucus is concerned about agency incentives once it starts collecting money. An agency could begin to charge new fees in places
that were previously free, charge higher fees or try to attract as many visitors as possible to collect more money, said Barrett Kaiser, spokesman for Baucus.

However, Baucus does like the idea that fees remain where they are collected.

"Max thinks that when user fees are levied, it makes sense that the money stays at the site, however, he doesn’t think that a lot of new fees should be created," said Kaiser. "Congress will likely take up this issue this year, and Max intends to play a major role in how and where this program should be used."

Burns, though generally in support of the fee demonstration program, is concerned about the impact of fees on low-income users.

"I would hate to see anybody be banned from campgrounds and other areas," he said in a telephone interview.

But he agrees that recreation users should not be the only ones exempt from paying fees for use of public land. For example, ranchers pay to use public land for grazing, he said.

Gov. Marc Racicot has not been involved in the federal legislation at all, partly because of the lack of reaction from residents but also because it is a federal program.

"In three and a half years, to my knowledge, I haven’t gotten one call about the fee demonstration program," said Julie Lapeyre, policy advisor to Racicot. "We have not been overly active [in fee demonstration]. In this particular case, we have never reviewed the federal legislation."


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33

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