

*In 1996, Congress authorized the Recreation Fee Demonstration program (fee demo) through Public Law 104-134 (as amended: 16 United States Code 4601-6a), for the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The intent of the program is to test the application of recreation fees that are reinvested in recreation areas on federal lands and used to maintain and improve natural resources, recreation facilities, and services. The Forest Service is currently testing fees nationwide on 92 projects in 114 National Forests across 36 states and Puerto Rico.*

## **BLUEPRINT FOR FOREST SERVICE RECREATION FEES<sup>1</sup>**

### **GOAL:**

**Provide recreation sites, services, and settings that meet quality standards to enhance visitor experience and protect natural and cultural resources.**

The goal of the new recreation fee program is to retain fee revenues to supplement appropriations and other funding sources to repair, improve and maintain recreation sites and settings to quality standards (including elimination of recreation deferred maintenance) and to enhance the delivery of recreation services to standard.

Recreation sites include significantly developed overnight and day-use facilities. Recreation settings include areas where high impact occurs from recreation use that requires intensive management. Recreation services include reservation services, enhanced visitor safety and security, enhanced interpretive opportunities, and expanded visitor service hours.

### **KEY LESSONS LEARNED:**

1. Fees are acceptable if they have a direct connection to a perceived benefit.
2. Fees are most often supported for developed areas and expanded services.
3. Fairness, consistency, convenience of payment, and accountability are important to visitors.
4. An enduring program is only possible with wide support, especially public and congressional support.

### **ASSUMPTIONS:**

1. Appropriations for recreation for the foreseeable future will not be enough to meet recreation infrastructure and service needs.
2. Fees are only part of a more comprehensive funding strategy.
3. The next phase of the fee program will be substantially refined from the first phase. It will be nationally consistent and criteria-based, with a national system of recreation passes.
4. This blueprint outlines agency actions possible under current demonstration authority.

### **PRINCIPLES:**

1. The new fee program must be designed for visitor convenience, namely,
  - a. Seamless across agencies.
  - b. Convenient payment options (e.g., credit cards, Internet, off-site sales).
  - c. Single fee for basic recreation facilities/services.
2. Fees are part of a larger financial plan for recreation that includes appropriated funding, volunteer assistance, interagency cooperation, partnerships with the private sector, commercial operations, and leveraged funding.

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<sup>1</sup> [Blueprint for Forest Service Recreation Fees](http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/feedemo/projects02/blueprint.html) June 30, 2003--  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/feedemo/projects02/blueprint.html> (accessed 10-16-2003)

3. Each National Forest and Grassland will provide areas where a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities are available free of charge. Fees may be levied only where some level of developed infrastructure or recreation service is readily apparent, or in defined areas of high visitor impact.
4. A majority of revenues are retained for use where collected and provide benefits visible to and desired by visitors.
5. Fee collection and revenue redistribution methods will use appropriate new technologies, such as Internet and credit/smart card transactions.
6. Program implementation will be limited by consistent, predictable criteria, rather than through a set number of sites.
7. Business plans assist in the decision-making process on whether and where it is appropriate to charge fees. Plans are developed at the appropriate level (National, Regional, or Forest) and include factors such as level and type of development, cost and safety of collection, use, compliance and enforcement capability, convenience, partnerships, stakeholder input, impacts to underserved communities and local businesses, and private sector alternatives.
8. National Forests will involve the communities of place and interest in decisions about fee project design and where the fee money is invested.
9. Fees will not be used to control amount of visitor use; i.e., fees will not be a substitute for direct visitor use/impact management methods, such as permits, reservation systems, or other site-specific use limitations.
10. We will be accountable for monitoring fiscal integrity, efficiency, policy, revenue distribution, implementation, and evaluation of the fee program.

#### **LEADERSHIP:**

1. National Recreation Fee Leadership Council, co-chaired by USDA and DOI, will oversee and coordinate the recreation fee program. Responsibilities include: 1) national consistency; 2) pass policy; 3) collection policy; 4) expenditure criteria; 5) fee receipt distribution methodology and equity; 6) accounting and reporting mechanisms; 7) program evaluation, including feedback loops for adjusting policies and addressing problems; 8) joint research on various aspects of the program, including pass technology and alternatives to enhance public convenience and increase agency program administrative efficiency; and 9) other recreation fee policy and coordination as required.
2. The Washington Office will set broad agency policy and performance measures for the program, based on Fee Council decisions and agency needs. Guidance will be in the form of desk guides or directives. Broad oversight of and coordination with the regional fee boards will also be conducted from the WO. National-level projects will be reviewed and approved by the WO Director of Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Resources in consultation with Regional Fee Boards.
3. Accountability for program implementation is through line officers at the various implementation levels. Regional Foresters, through interdisciplinary Regional Fee Boards shall perform oversight of the Recreation Fee program and ensure that projects comply with law and policy. Regional Boards shall report to Regional Foresters, who will require each Forest to (1) submit line-officer-approved business plans, communication plans, and civil rights impact analyses for prospective fee sites, which will be reviewed by the Board and approved by the Regional Forester (unless otherwise specified); (2) monitor fee program implementation; and (3) maintain timely and effective fiscal accounting through tools such as business plans and stakeholder reports.
4. Regional Foresters and their regional fee boards will implement plans to align with the blueprint. Initial focus will be on dropping or modifying fees currently charged that are inconsistent with the blueprint.

## **FEE CATEGORIES**

Public lands recreation sites and services provide an array of benefits ranging from collective societal goods to personal use. The following categories reflect the range of benefits and fees for various recreational opportunities on National Forests and Grasslands.

1. No Fee Sites and Services – This category reflects the broad societal benefits of providing general taxpayer-supported recreational opportunities and the principle that a portion of all National Forests and Grasslands should be available free of charge to all of the public. In areas other than those specified below in #2 and #3, we would NOT charge a fee for:
  - a. General access to National Forests or Grasslands.
  - b. Drive-through only, or walk/hike-through only.
  - c. Undesignated parking along roadsides.
  - d. Overlooks or scenic pullouts.
  - e. Dispersed areas with low or no expenditures in facilities or services.
  - f. Information offices and centers that provide general area information, regulations, orientation, and limited services and/or interpretive exhibits.
  
2. Basic recreation sites and services fee – This category reflects a mix of societal and personal benefits, where it is appropriate for users to share in a portion of the costs. The decision on whether or not to charge basic fees meeting the following criteria is based on business plan analysis, which includes local considerations.

Fees for basic recreation sites and services will be assessed through a system of passes. These passes would generally be accepted for all passengers in a private vehicle, or for mandatory Forest Service transportation systems. The intent is that most fee sites will fall into the basic fee category. Basic fees may be assessed for sites and services that meet the following criteria:

- a. National Recreation Areas, National Monuments, National Volcanic Monuments, National Scenic Areas, and National Conservation Areas, or
  - b. Significantly developed day-use recreation sites and services as defined in Table 1, or
  - c. High Impact Recreation Area- An area where significant expenditures for restoration, public safety, sanitation facilities, education, maintenance, and other activities are necessary to protect the health and safety of visitors, cultural resources and the natural environment. The areas are characterized by heavy public recreation use. They may contain little development, and use results in environmental impacts such as noticeable litter, vandalism, soil compaction or erosion. These areas require intensive management to enhance visitor experiences, address environmental needs and manage conflicting uses.
3. Expanded recreation sites and services fees – This category includes sites and services that provide direct benefits primarily to individuals or groups rather than to society as a whole. It is thus appropriate for the individual or group that is provided a direct service or uses a specialized facility to bear a greater share of these costs.

Expanded fees cover specialized outdoor recreation sites and services. The decision on whether a basic or expanded fee applies at sites that could fall into either category must take into account local considerations, including fees charged at nearby sites that are similar in nature, value for fee

paid, and degree of development. When in doubt, charge a basic fee. Golden Age and Access Passports will only be valid for 50% discount for categories a, b, c, and d. The amount of the fee will be recommended by each individual forest, within national ranges for each type of use. Expanded recreation sites and services include:

- a. Developed campgrounds where a majority of the following amenities are provided: tent or trailer spaces, drinking water, access road, refuse containers, toilet facilities, fee collection device, reasonable visitor protection, and (if campfires are permitted in the campground) simple devices for containing a campfire. Designated overnight camping areas that are not developed but which require additional management and amenities such as toilet facilities refuse containers, and/or on-site hosts may charge a fee commensurate with a lower level of development.
- b. Developed boat launches with specialized facilities or services such as: mechanical or hydraulic boat lifts or facilities, multi-lane paved ramps, paved parking, refuse containers, restrooms and other improvements such as boarding floats, loading ramps, fish cleaning stations and/or attendants.
- c. Developed swimming sites with a majority of the following amenities: bathhouse with plumbing (showers and/or flush toilets), refuse containers, picnic areas, paved parking, attendants (including lifeguards), swimming floats and decks.
- d. Specialized interpretive services such as guided tours, movies, and seminars.

Golden Passports are not valid for the following:

- e. Group day-use or overnight sites, such as pavilions, group/multi-family campsites.
- f. Facility or equipment rentals, such as cabins, lookouts, and historic structures, and specialized equipment such as hookups for water, electricity, cable, and sewer, sanitary dump stations, audio tour equipment, portable sanitation devices, boating equipment, binoculars, and similar recreation equipment.
- g. Specialized services that require significant non-routine agency expenditures and/or additional attention by agency staff such as intensive management of off highway vehicle (OHV) recreation areas (including snowmobiles), routinely groomed cross country ski trails, and extensive conservation programs (including Heritage or Forest Expeditions).
- h. Optional transportation services/systems.
- i. Reservation services and personal use permit activity and application fees. Sites and activities requiring personal use permits for capacity-based allocation of use may be charged an expanded fee only if justified by significantly increased expense, otherwise a basic fee will apply. Where personal use recreation permit fees are required, they shall be in lieu of any basic fees assessed to access the expanded fee site. The fee level should fund an appropriate portion of the expenses directly related to the activity for which the fee is being charged, and may include a single permit-processing or reservation fee.
- j. Concessionaire services are not included in the recreation fee program and are not covered by passes, except as agreed to in advance between parties.

## **EXPENDITURES**

1. Forest Expenditures – A minimum of 80% of recreation fee receipts are retained at each National Forest. Of this amount, at least 75% shall be used to meet “meaningful measures” standards for backlogged repair and maintenance projects (including projects relating to health and safety); interpretation, signage, habitat or facility enhancement, resource preservation, maintenance, law enforcement related to public use, in support of volunteer projects and for Challenge Cost Share projects and similar partnership authorities relating to recreation fee projects. At full operational levels (after start-up), direct operating or capital costs associated with recreation fee collection or program management will not exceed 25% of the revenues retained at the site. Average cost of collection paid by fees should not exceed 15%. No fee revenues will be used for funding indirect portions of cost pools; such costs will be paid by appropriated funds using the primary purpose principle.
2. Regional & National Expenditures – Expenditures shall be used (1) to reduce recreation deferred maintenance; (2) for a revolving fund focused on recreation projects authorized by legislation that provide a demonstrable improvement to National Forest recreation sites and services that would otherwise take years to realize; (3) funding enhancements through volunteer projects and the Challenge Cost Share program; and (4) for limited Regional and National fee program administration.

## **FEE STRUCTURE**

Recreation fees will be based upon a pass system for basic recreation sites/services and expanded Fees for expanded recreation sites/services.

Basic Pass System – Consistent with the principle of a single fee for basic recreation sites and services, a pass system will be used for this purpose (see “Fee Category #2” above). The pass system will be implemented to minimize fee layering and avoid multiple fees at nearby sites.

- a) Types of Passes. A visitor may purchase the following passes:

Forest Pass – A Forest Pass will be available for basic recreation sites and services on the specific National Forest for which it has been purchased. A Forest Pass may be valid for a single day or for a period of up to 12 months from the date of purchase, or calendar year as determined in the business plan. Passes may also be developed for expanded fee sites (see below).

Multi-Forest or Regional Passes- These passes may be developed by travel region or state and may include multiple federal and state agencies.

National Passes – For visitor convenience, an interagency national pass is the desired goal for the program. Until legislation makes such a pass available, the Golden Passport fee demonstration business plan has been modified to allow acceptance of the Golden Eagle, Golden Age, and Golden Access Passports as the national pass for all sites and areas that meet the definition for basic fees (change “entrance” fee definition from Land and Water Conservation Fund Act-LWCFA-to align with the “basic” fee definition). Golden Age and Golden Access passports would continue to provide benefits as currently authorized for expanded recreation fee sites in category 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d (50% discount). Passes will not be accepted for sites and services meeting category 3e, 3f, 3g, 3h, or 3i.

Pass Administration. Passes will be sold as an Internet transaction and at sites or points-of-contact most convenient for the public. Passes will be sold per vehicle, and compliance will generally be vehicle-based. Where vehicle-based passes are impractical or not enforceable (as in walk-up sites), fees may be

assessed on a per-person daily fee basis or with a basic fee pass (valid for the holder and 3 persons). Forests and Regions may set policies for issuing agency passes in exchange for volunteer services. Issuance of Golden Eagle Passports for volunteers will be based on interagency policy.

Expanded Fees will be assessed on an individual point-of-service basis. They apply to items covered in “Fee Category #3” above. A multi-visit annual pass may be developed to provide value where expanded fees are charged.

**NATIONAL CONSISTENCY/LOCAL FLEXIBILITY:** Adherence to the blueprint will achieve national consistency. Major exceptions to respond to local situations must comply with legal authority, have demonstrated local support, and first be reviewed and recommended by Regional fee boards and Regional Foresters prior to final approval by the Chief of the Forest Service.

Table 1 – Significantly Developed Day-Use Sites and Services

Sites and Services Category	Sites and Services Descriptors
Significantly Developed Day-Use Sites	<p>All BASIC recreation sites and services must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Facilitate DAY-USE recreation or serve DAY-USE recreationists;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be constructed to site modification development scale 3, 4, or 5;</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Have convenient payment option available locally; and</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meet critical national quality standards defined in meaningful measures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Have defined parking (paved or well-surfaced);</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Have identification and informational sign; AND</li> </ul> <p>the facility must include <b>3 items/elements</b> from the following list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Toilet facility,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Hitching rails,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Loading ramp,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Interpretive sign(s), exhibit(s), kiosk(s),</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Basic boat launch/ramp,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Boat dock,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Picnic tables,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Specialized structures (warming hut, sun shelter, dressing room)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Trash receptacle,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Potable water,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Wildlife/fish viewing areas, or</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> On-site agency representative (intended to provide information, security, parking control, or other public assistance).</li> </ul> <p>Examples: Trailheads for basic cross-country ski trails, hiking, biking, horseback, basic OHV trails, or multiple use, interpretive sites, river parking sites, lake parking sites, reservoir parking sites, swimming beaches, or developed picnic sites.</p> <p>Note: Revenues collected from these sites may be applied to the recreation opportunities accessed from them.</p>

<b>Sites and Services Category</b>	<b>Sites and Services Descriptors</b>
Visitor/Interpretive/Discovery Centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Sites and facilities designed and managed to provide a broad range of information and interpretive programs. These facilities may have a natural or cultural attraction as a major theme, and provide basic services. Basic interpretive services include short interpretive talks at campgrounds and visitor centers, and are not charged separately from the facility fee.</li> </ul>
Developed Recreation Sites Along Highway Corridors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ A collection of significantly developed recreation sites (as described above) situated along a heavily used paved road corridor. The use of the corridor, including the associated sites, requires intensive management. Fees are not charged for use of the highway or access to private land or business.</li> </ul>