

Chairman Raúl M. Grijalva
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing
Paying to Play: Implementation of Fee Authority on Federal Lands
June 18, 2008

The Subcommittee will now come to order.

We all own our national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, historic sites, monuments, recreation areas and conservation areas. We pay for their care, upkeep and management through our taxes. So, let me say first, that I firmly believe that the American public should not have to pay additional fees to have access to our world class system of parks, forests, refuges and public lands -- whether it be listening to a ranger program in a national park, hiking the wilderness, or enjoying a picnic in the woods in a national forest.

These activities have traditionally been free to the public and they are part of why we love to visit these special places.

However, despite our Congressional obligation to fully fund ALL of the needs of our public land

management agencies, recent budgets have failed to prioritize the stewardship of these unique places. And years of underfunding have led to maintenance backlogs, lack of services, and shortages in project and operations funding

In light of these constant shortfalls, we have turned to recreation fees to supplement the funding of our Federal lands – and our land management agencies have come to rely on these fee revenues. Yet, this is an imperfect solution, and one that has become increasingly controversial -- with critics on both sides of the political aisle.

So, it is my intent today to explore how the fee programs on federal lands are being implemented -- something that is long overdue -- and to examine why fees have become so controversial.

When the Fee Demonstration Program was enacted in 1996 -- as a rider to appropriations bills -- we were told that this was a “trial program.” Fee Demo, as it came to be known, would test the feasibility of

permitting the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service to charge fees for a wide variety of uses. These fees would then be kept at the collection site and would go towards much needed repairs and services that had gone unfunded.

While many responded favorably to the Fee Demo Program, there were troubling problems with the implementation and establishment of these fees.

So, when the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act was passed in 2005 to replace Fee Demo – and, again it was done without debate, as an appropriations rider -- we were assured that the agencies had learned their lessons. We were told that FLREA (Fla-ree-uh) included the best practices learned from eight years of experiments, mistakes and ultimately, experience, under the Fee Demo Program.

However, while there is little doubt that the \$2 billion in fee revenue generated since 1997 has been enthusiastically received by the agencies, and that fees

have given hope to agencies which had watched their proposed budget gaps widen, these advances have come at a cost.

Many contend that these fees are not only a double tax on the recreating public, but that they are also unfair, inconsistent and confusing. Further, critics assert that fees discriminate against lower-income people, rural residents and low impact recreational users.

Of specific concern to me today as well, is how fees are being managed on Forest Service lands. Administrative difficulties, questions on where and why certain fees are charged, strong public resistance and lawsuits seem to have plagued the Forest Service's implementation of the fee program.

Today we will hear from witnesses who will share their frustrations with this system and specifically with the Forest Service's lack of transparency in setting fee rates and imposing new fees, and their lack of fiscal accountability. We will also hear that although the

names of the types of fees have changed, FLREA has not addressed the underlying problems with those fees - and that this has simply compounded public confusion and frustration with the Forest Service Fee Program.

In fact, in the past two weeks, since the announcement of this hearing, we have been inundated each day with testimonials from citizens all over the West calling for the repeal of FLREA. I thank all of the folks that took the time to contact us, and I recognize their concerns.

After 11 years of charging recreation fees, I would have hoped that we would be beyond these issues. Yet it's obvious that we are not.

I would also like to thank all of our witnesses for traveling from around the country to be here today to share their expertise. It's invaluable to this committee as well.

I would now like to recognize my friend and colleague Chairwoman Napolitano of the Water and

Power Subcommittee for any opening statement she may have.