



Highlights of [GAO-03-470](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1996, federal land management agencies have collected over \$900 million in recreation fees from the public under an experimental initiative called the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program. Under the trial program, the Congress authorized the four federal land management agencies, including the Forest Service, to charge fees to visitors and to retain the revenues for use in addition to other appropriated funds. The Congress originally authorized the program for 3 years and has extended it several times.

As Congress considers whether to extend the program or to make it permanent, the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health asked GAO to address several questions about the Forest Service's administration of the program: (1) How are spending priorities determined for the revenues generated by the program? (2) How has the agency spent its fee demonstration program revenues? (3) What, if anything, is the agency doing to measure the impact of the recreation fee revenues on reducing the agency's deferred maintenance backlog? (4) How does the agency account for its fee demonstration program revenues?

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-470](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-470).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry T. Hill at (202) 512-9775 or hillbt@gao.gov.

## RECREATION FEES

# Information on Forest Service Management of Revenue from the Fee Demonstration Program

## What GAO Found

The Forest Service largely determines its spending priorities for the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program through local forest managers who are given broad discretion in deciding how to use fee demonstration revenues. Local managers are expected to establish spending priorities consistent with general program guidance provided by Forest Service headquarters. This guidance advises local forest managers to spend fee demonstration revenues on needs that have been identified by forest visitors.

On the basis of priorities identified by local users, the Forest Service has spent fee demonstration revenues on a wide range of projects at national forests throughout the country. The legislation authorizing the fee demonstration program permitted all the participating agencies to spend fee revenues on certain categories of activities to increase the quality of the visitor experience and enhance the protection of resources. GAO reviewed the activities of nine demonstration sites in three Forest Service regions to verify that the fee revenues were being spent in accordance with the authorizing legislation for the program and agency spending priorities. GAO found no inconsistency.

The Forest Service does not have a process for measuring the impact of fee demonstration expenditures on reducing the deferred maintenance backlog. Further, while acknowledging that it has a significant deferred maintenance problem, the agency has not developed a reliable estimate of its deferred maintenance needs.

The Forest Service keeps its fee revenue in an account separate from other appropriated funds, as required by the authorizing fee program legislation. Although the Forest Service tracks its fee revenues and expenditures separately from other appropriated funds, it does not accurately account for some fee collection costs.

The Forest Service, in commenting on a draft of this report, generally agreed with the report's contents.

### Cleanup of an Illegal Trash Dump in the San Bernardino National Forest Using Recreational Fee Demonstration Program Revenues



Source: Forest Service.