

John Day-Snake RAC Planning Subcommittee Meeting

6:30 p.m. PT, Sept. 15, 2021, via Zoom

Meeting convened at 6:30 pm, via Zoom.

Attendance: RAC members Shay White, Art Waugh, Jim Reiss, Terry Drever Gee, Bob Krein and Brian Sykes; Designated Federal Official/Vale DM Wayne Monger; Prineville DM Dennis Teitzel; RAC coordinator Larisa Bogardus; Prineville BLM Deschutes Field Manager Jeff Kitchens, additional staff members Michael Millay, Kat Smith, Beth Hartwood and Kyle Hensley; and member of the public Mary Fleischmann.

Meeting began at 6:30 p.m. Jeff Kitchens opened the discussion using a PowerPoint submitted to the group beforehand. At present, the only source of revenue is boating permits, but other recreational uses have increased significantly, including hiking, biking, horseback riding, camping and other activities.

In 2015, the RAC advised Prineville BLM to look at a more equitable fee system to include a lengthy public process to gather as much user input as possible. This was supported by the Lower Deschutes River Managers Group, which represents all agencies involved in the management of the area.

Annual operating costs to the Prineville District range from \$750,000 to \$800,000 per year, about 75 percent of which goes toward labor in the form of services, maintenance, ranger staffing and other work. The five-year average for boater fees is about \$495,000, which is split with Oregon Parks and Recreation to provide services along the LDR corridor.

The new fee system would simplify the boating fee schedule, which is current tied to weekend use vs. weekday use as well as seasonality of use. The proposal is a flat \$5 per person, per day fee, which would generate about \$650,000 per year. Fees would still be split, with \$2 going to Oregon Parks and \$3 retained by the district. Fees are not intended to cover all costs, but they should offset the cost of providing services, including public toilets and maintenance.

From April to August of this year, a 120-day comment period was offered (much greater than the 30 days required) to collect feedback regarding proposed camping and day use fees. During that time, 12 comments were received regarding the fees – five were opposed, three had specific concerns, and seven supported the increase and the simplified permit process.

Statistically, non-boater use has grown exponentially over the past 10 years. Trail cameras show walk-in traffic has increased from an average of 1,360 per month to 2,100. A new, \$5 per person, per night fee is proposed for non-boating campers not staying in developed campgrounds.

A number of steps remain before any implementation can take place. If the RAC recommends going forward, the proposal would then have to be approved by the multi-agency river managers group. A collection plan would have to be developed and Oregon Parks and

Recreation would have to be updated, along with recreation.gov and many websites associated with the area.

RAC member Brian Sykes expressed concern the proposal represents an overall cost increase of 35% to outfitters and guides, which they will have to pass on to their customers, over and above the increasing costs of inflation. They are also paying other fees, such as the \$1 fee to enter and exit the Warm Springs reservation. If use is increasing in other areas, why isn't more of the revenue being captured from those areas? He understands the need, and is personally willing to pay the extra cost, but the outfitters and guides community he represents is opposed.

Meeting paused at 7:48 p.m. to allow for Public Comment period.

Mary Fleischmann of Bitterbrush Broads said she's been interested in the Lower Deschutes River since the mid-90s and fully supports all user fees to address the huge increase in natural resources use across the state. The public doesn't always understand their impact on resources and the need to find ways to prevent overuse.

RAC member Shay White asked if the proposal would be impacted in any way by the proposed Wild and Scenic Rivers bill in Congress. No, most of the Deschutes River has already been designated and it is not targeted for expansion.

Jim Reiss noted that when usage doubles, the stress on natural resources is astronomical. We need to pay for what we have.

Jeff Kitchen said the district has been very intentional in finding other resources. The fees are just a part of the overall picture. The district is planning to redo the seasonal compound to provide housing, along with the shop and warehouse. Users will see much more benefit than the \$3. The district also utilizes volunteers, partners and contractors to do more.

Consensus was one against, one abstaining and four supporting a formal RAC recommendation of the business plan and fee schedule as presented. As subgroup lead, Jim Reiss agreed to write the recommendation to the full RAC. Brian Sykes encouraged him to list the pros and cons, and include the group's concerns and reservations that boaters are paying more than walk-ins.

Although tonight's discussion is BLM fees, there are other entities that charge fees as well. BLM and others are allowed to charge fees to offset costs.

If passed, would the new fee schedule be implemented in 2022? There is a 6-month implementation process, including a Federal Register Notice. Also, a federal moratorium on new recreation fees would prevent this being implemented until the pandemic is over, so it probably won't go into effect until 2023.

Meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m.