

A Decade in Review

The BLM's Recreation Fee Program at Work



All photos taken at BLM recreation fee sites.

Passage of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act of 2004 (REA) has greatly improved the quality of recreational experiences for visitors to public lands and waters managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), while boosting local economies and creating employment opportunities for young people, veterans, and many others. Recreational experiences are especially important in the growing West, where more than half of BLM-managed public lands are within 25 miles of an urban area. The BLM and other participating agencies have learned important lessons during the REA years about programs for the collection and retention of recreation fees.



HOW IT'S WORKING

1. Enhancing recreational experiences.

Recreation fees collected under REA averaged \$19 million a year in 2007–2012, enabling the BLM to enhance significantly the visitor services and recreation opportunities available to the public at the sites where the fees are collected. The BLM has used fee money to restore historic buildings for visitors, fix toilets, upgrade trails and roads, install boat ramps and fish-cleaning stations, provide new educational programs, build visitor centers, better manage campgrounds, enhance websites, provide transportation services, upgrade potable water systems, and create more accessible facilities.

Recreation fees are also used to hire workers to improve facilities and services at the site of collection. These fees allow the BLM to supplement its practice of enhancing the visitor experience through grants, partners, and youth programs.

To evaluate and improve its services to the visiting public, the BLM has conducted visitor satisfaction surveys since 2005. The BLM selects two sites from each state to participate in surveys each year. In FY 2011, 92 percent of surveyed visitors felt that sites provided appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities.



2. Encouraging visitation.

The BLM provides a diverse array of recreation opportunities for visitors, ranging from back-country camping to off-road vehicle riding to river rafting. Visitation to BLM lands has increased from an estimated 52.9 million visitors in 2003 to an estimated 58 million visitors in 2012, an increase of approximately 10 percent since the passage of REA.

A notable example of visitation occurs along 140 miles of the lower Colorado River, including 20 miles of Lake Havasu shoreline in Arizona. Currently, 10 million people a year seek out the world-class water-based recreation opportunities supported by the BLM's Recreation Fee Program, in addition to camping, hiking, wildlife-watching, and off-highway vehicle activities.

3. Stimulating local economies.

Outfitters, guides, and other private entities who rely on public lands for their livelihood benefit directly from the increased visitation made possible by fee-supported services. The Warren Bridge Recreation Area (WBRA) on the Green River in Wyoming is a case in point. Recreation fees support the campground and day-use area that serve as the gateway to the WBRA. In addition, each of the WBRA's 12 river access sites now provides designated campsites, restrooms, picnic tables, and fire rings. Four sites offer boat ramps for nonmotorized river floating. Visitors can also enjoy the WBRA Hiking Trail, which was constructed using local labor (the Wyoming Conservation Crew) funded by the BLM's Recreation Fee Program.



4. Ensuring compliance and accountability.

The opportunity for private entities to do business on public lands and related waters under the permit system requires that the government be able to monitor compliance. The cost of compliance activities includes equipment, such as snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles; travel, including travel by agency or contracted aircraft; and field facilities, personnel, and supplies.

Special Recreation Permit (SRP) monitoring and compliance are directly supported by the BLM's "pay where you play" policy, according to which 100 percent of the fees collected remain at the local sites and are available for immediate use. For example, the BLM's Anchorage Field Office collected approximately \$12,000 in SRP fees in FY 2011, largely as a result of commercial hunting guide and outfitter activities. These funds provided for recreational infrastructure and helped fund renovation of a remote BLM field facility needed to monitor permit compliance.

The BLM also uses business plans for all fee sites to explain to the public the purposes of recreation sites, how fees are collected and spent, and what plans exist for future recreation fee expenditures. To ensure accountability for REA revenue generated at BLM fee sites, the BLM conducts a variety of fee site evaluations. These include targeted, independent fee site evaluations at two fee sites in each state per year and evaluations of a representative sample of fee sites chosen based on certain criteria and factors. Priority is given to fee programs with issues identified by audits, regulatory agency interest, or other circumstances (e.g., newly designated sites or sites where changes to fees generate public interest).

The BLM Recreation & Visitor Services Division ensures accountability for fees collected through SRPs. The division contracts with a certified public accountant to review the SRP program in each state's field offices administering SRPs. Each state is audited every 5 years, with audits occurring in two to five states per year.

In addition to numerous internal mechanisms for accountability, the BLM informs the public about fee revenue expenditures by posting information at recreation sites (campgrounds and trailheads) and visitor centers, on websites, and in newsletters.



5. Standardizing the visitor experience.

Under REA, the BLM has been able to standardize the agency's fees, passes, and reservation systems, making it easier for visitors to plan visits to federal lands and related waters and for the BLM to meet the demands of increased visitation. Certain permits that the BLM issues under REA, however (such as Recreation Use Permits and Special Recreation Permits), are very similar to permits issued under different names by other agencies. Understandably, many visitors are confused about the different fees, policies, and types of permits employed across land-managing agencies. Visitors often do not understand what fees are for, where and how to pay them, and why fees differ depending on the agency managing a particular recreation site. Terms such as "standard amenity fee" and "expanded amenity fee" require lengthy explanations about what these fees cover and how they differ, because visitors usually do not find these terms intuitive or descriptive. The BLM is working to better educate the visiting public and provide consistent information to help alleviate any confusion.

Interagency Passes (the America the Beautiful – the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass) have greatly improved standardization of the visitor experience. A pass purchased at lands managed by one agency can often be used across sites and even across managing agencies, reducing the need for many visitors to pay for access to individual sites and improving the ease of access. The Interagency Pass, however, can convey different benefits and carry different limitations depending on the fee collection site. For the BLM, this issue often arises at sites that require an expanded amenity fee, which is not covered by an Interagency Pass (rather than a standard amenity fee, which is covered). Confusion can be compounded when a visitor purchases an Interagency Pass from one agency and learns that the pass will not be honored at a particular recreation site managed by another agency. The BLM meets regularly with other agencies that use Interagency Passes to help ensure that employees from all agencies administer the passes as consistently as possible under REA.



6. Engaging the public.

The large majority of BLM lands (99 percent) are available for recreational use with no fees. The BLM manages nearly 3,600 recreation sites, of which approximately 430 require fees. The remaining sites are free. There have been 12 fee increases on BLM REA sites and 10 new fee sites added since 2008; all changes to BLM fees have been reviewed with public input and approved by the appropriate Recreation Resource Advisory Committee (Recreation RAC).

Under REA, the BLM ensures that the public is provided with opportunities to participate in the development of new recreation fees or the modification of fees, by publishing a notice in the Federal Register, local newspapers, and publications near the site where the recreation fee would be established or changed. The BLM and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have also established a Recreation RAC in each state or region, or have agreed to use existing BLM Recreation RACs to recommend fee proposals.

Recreation RACs, which represent diverse interests, make recommendations on implementing,

eliminating, or changing standard and expanded amenity recreation fees and noncommercial Special Recreation Permit fees, and expansion or limitation of recreation fee programs. Recreation RACs are one component of a larger civic engagement process and provide a critical public perspective on the USFS and BLM recreation fee programs. Through their diverse representation, Recreation RACs give the public a formal voice and provide constructive local input into the decision-making process.

The process for Recreation RAC review and recommendation of fee proposals, however, has raised some concerns. For example, Recreation RACs cover states, portions of states, or regions and therefore do not necessarily provide national consistency in recreation fee programs. In addition, vacancies or absences on a Recreation RAC can result in delayed reviews. Recreation RACs must also document general public support for proposed fee changes, which can be difficult if public interest or participation is low. The BLM continues to work with the Recreation RACs to ensure that public input is properly incorporated into the BLM's Recreation Fee Program.

CONCLUSION

Public lands and related waters managed by the BLM offer more diverse recreational opportunities than those managed by any other federal agency. The BLM looks forward to continuing to improve its Recreation Fee Program as it provides recreation opportunities and services to present and future generations. REA is critical to the success of these efforts.

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