



Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act Second Triennial Report to Congress 2009

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Cover Photograph: Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area, Bureau of Land Management

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Executive Summary

The Recreation Fee Program, authorized in 2004 by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), enables land management agencies to retain and spend recreation fees where they are collected. This enhances the facilities, services, and visitor experiences at those sites, in addition to reducing deferred maintenance backlogs. Agencies' REA revenues help provide quality recreation opportunities for millions of visitors — from visiting a remote cabin in an Alaskan wildlife refuge to climbing a national forest fire lookout to learning about the nation's cultural history in a national park. Whether finding technical challenges via off-highway vehicle trails managed by the Bureau of Land Management or boating on the Bureau of Reclamation's New Melones Lake, recreation fee revenues provide important services and recreation opportunities for the public. Recreation fee revenues also allow managers to plan for long-term facility improvement projects. REA revenues enable the government to leverage partnership dollars and facilitate volunteer work resulting in on-the-ground benefits.

The National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (FS), have made tremendous progress in implementing this program and are continually improving it based on their experience. The REA Program replaced and built upon the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program (Fee Demo), which began in 1996. REA enabled improvements to visitor services and facilities on Federal lands across the nation, authorized a new national interagency recreation pass (The "America the Beautiful — the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass"), and established a robust process to engage the public directly in the Recreation Fee Program.

Recreation fees are indispensable in supporting and enhancing visitor experiences at popular sites across the country. However, there are, and will continue to be, extensive opportunities for visitors to recreate on Federal lands without paying REA fees. Of 391 NPS sites nationwide, 196 charge fees under REA. Out of approximately 450 FWS refuges that are open to the public, 35 charge entrance fees. Only one of the 42 recreation areas that Reclamation directly manages currently participates in REA. In addition, approximately 99.5 percent of lands managed by BLM and 98 percent of lands managed by the FS can be accessed by the public at no charge.

Section 9 of REA calls for the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to submit reports on the Recreation Fee Program to Congress on a triennial basis. The first Triennial Report was submitted on May 1, 2006, and provided information on activities that the Departments were undertaking to transition from the Fee Demo Program to REA. These activities included inventorying sites to ensure that the fees charged were consistent with the requirements under REA for charging fees; establishing public participation processes consistent with REA; and establishing the new Interagency Pass. REA has now been fully implemented, and the agencies are engaged in improving implementation.

The second Triennial Report discusses progress to date and ongoing activities. In accordance with Section 9 of REA, this report:

- Provides examples of past projects accomplished using REA fees;
- Provides examples of planned projects and programs to be accomplished with REA fees;
- Highlights the status of the REA program implementation, including budgetary data; and
- Makes recommendations for changes in the overall fee system.

Following an overview of the REA Program in Section 1, Section 2 of this report contains agency examples of the diversity and effectiveness of recreation fee projects. This section details examples of each agency's recent accomplishments, as well as examples of planned projects using REA revenues. Projects accomplished with recreation fee revenues range from visitor services to facility management to law enforcement, and are accomplished where the fees are collected.

Section 3 contains information on the status of Recreation Fee Program administration and operations. Since the first Triennial Report, the Departments have made substantial visitor service improvements, including establishing Recreation.gov, a web-based national reservation system, launching the Interagency Pass, initiating new public participation processes, and instituting improvements in accountability and consistency.

Notable achievements include:

- *National recreation reservation system.* Advanced reservations are now available through Recreation.gov for more than 2,500 locations including campgrounds, day use areas, cabins, and tour facilities. Since its launch in February 2007, Recreation.gov has received almost 15 million site visits and processed over 2.8 million reservations. Agencies collected \$75.3 million in revenue in 2008 through the reservation system.
- *Interagency pass sales.* Sales of the Interagency Pass began in January 2007. Passes, decals, and brochures are now available at over 1,500 field sites, through the internet, and through select third-party vendors. Standardized guidance, training, and availability of pass inventory through a central vendor have enhanced consistency of implementation. As of September 2008, approximately 2.5 million passes have been shipped to agencies' field sites. In 2008, approximately 760,000 passes had been sold, generating nearly \$29 million: \$260,000 by BLM, \$290,000 by FWS, \$24.7 million by NPS, \$820 by Reclamation, \$1.7 million by FS, and \$1.9 million via central sales.
- *Photograph contest.* The *Share the Experience Public Lands Photo Contest* was established in 2006, and in its first three years has received approximately 36,000 entries. The contest provides a means for visitors to share photographs they have taken, while increasing their awareness of Federal lands. The winning photograph becomes the image on the following year's Annual Pass.
- *Public involvement.* The agencies have refined and increased opportunities for public involvement when setting or changing fees. BLM and the FS established Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRACs) that cover all but three states. Since 2006, BLM has sought RRAC review of 49 recreation fee changes, and FS has sought RRAC review of 893 recreation fee changes.
- *Accountability.* The agencies are also taking additional steps to increase accountability in fee collection activities and expenditure of recreation revenue. For example, NPS is procuring a new centralized point-of-sale cash register system for all fee-collecting National Parks.
- *The Bureau of Reclamation.* Reclamation is the only REA agency that was not part of the Fee Demo program. Of 42 developed recreation areas directly managed by Reclamation, six meet the criteria established in REA for fee sites. Of these six, California's New Melones Lake was selected to participate in REA. It has been operating as a REA site since FY 2008.

Section 3 also contains budget and visitation information. Highlights include:

- *Revenues.* REA revenue collection increased over the three-year period covered in this report, from \$209.5 million in FY 2006, to \$245.5 million in FY 2007, to \$253.2 million in FY 2008. Of the \$253.2 million in FY 2008, NPS collected \$171.9 million, FWS collected \$4.7 million, BLM collected \$15.0 million, Reclamation collected \$0.2 million, and FS collected \$61.6 million.
- *Costs of Collection.* The average cost of collecting fee revenues, across the agencies, was 14.5 percent of gross fee revenue in FY 2008. In FY 2003, the aggregate cost of collection was 20.7 percent. All four agencies have seen overall decreases in the cost of collection over the last five years. The cost of collection in FY 2008 was 17.2 percent for NPS, 15.0 percent for FWS, 2.8 percent for BLM, and 9.4 percent for the FS.¹
- *Obligations.* Annual obligations as a percentage of total revenue have increased from approximately 33 percent in FY 2000 to 46 percent in FY 2008. The total unobligated balance in FY 2008 was \$307.7 million: \$266.7 million for NPS; \$5.3 million for FWS; \$10.1 million for BLM; and \$25.6 million for the FS.
- *Visitation.* People made more than half a billion visits to Federal recreational lands in 2008: 274.3 million visits for NPS, 41.3 million for FWS, 56.8 million for BLM, and 661,481 for Reclamation (for a DOI-wide total of 373.0); and the FS estimates that there were approximately 179 million National Forest visits in 2007, the last year for which data is available. Over a five-year period, visitation to DOI-managed lands has increased (it was 358.0 million in 2003); while annual visitation from 2007 to 2008 has decreased slightly, from 373.5 million visits to 373.0 million visits.

Improvement of the Recreation Fee Program

The agencies are pursuing the following changes to the Recreation Fee Program:

- The agencies are exploring options that may allow Senior and Access Pass sales/issuance through the mail or internet, pending resolution of privacy and program integrity issues. Options are also being explored to provide decals to Senior and Access Pass holders that have open-topped vehicles, such as motorcycles and jeeps.
- NPS will be implementing a servicewide point-of-sale system that will standardize collection, accounting, reporting, and management of NPS recreation fee revenues. This system will improve the visitor experience by reducing wait times at many park entrance stations. NPS also intends to improve vacation planning for visitors by redesigning the NPS.gov site to make information easier to find and fee rates more apparent.
- NPS is also exploring options to allow for more convenient fee payment options and fee payments online.
- Improvements are planned for Recreation.gov, including online permitting, drawings, and reservations for special park uses.

¹ BLM's cost of collection is substantially lower than that of the other agencies because the vast majority of fees are collected using fee collection equipment that does not require personnel to be present.

- NPS will develop options to significantly reduce the unobligated balance of recreation fee revenues. For example, the agency has implemented a Recreation Fee Comprehensive Plan, which documents projects for five years. Each fee-collecting National Park completes an annual update of their plan, which includes a timeline for completing approved projects. Using this management tool, NPS reviews projects for compliance with REA, and consistency with the expenditure criteria, particularly the direct visitor connection. The plans continue to enhance NPS's accountability, as well as provide a mechanism for reporting and documenting performance accomplishments.
- FS has committed to reviewing its High Impact Recreation Areas (HIRAs) and presenting them to the RRACs. In 2007-2008, the FS undertook a national review of HIRAs, and will present the findings to the RRACs. Based on input from the RRACs, changes to some of these areas may be made.
- With increased demand for more recreation areas and fee sites, BLM has identified a need for more training. Through the National Training Center, distant learning courses are under development to address overall Recreation Fee Program management.