

FEE EQUITY

*Users Don't Always
Get What We Pay For*

The willingness of the motorcycling community to propose and accept additional fees for the privilege of riding a motorcycle never ceases to amaze me.

I have written in this space on numerous occasions about user fees in one form or another being imposed on motorcyclists. Motorcyclists have long advocated for the imposition of licensing and registration fees as a means of funding rider education programs. Similarly, off-road riders have advocated for OHV registration and trail pass programs to pay for trail construction and maintenance and trailhead amenities.

In the 1990s, there was an effort by public lands user groups to get the U.S. Congress to allow federal land management agencies to collect recreational user fees. This was controversial at the time because federal agencies are already funded by tax dollars. Because not enough funding was being allocated to them, recreational areas were not being maintained properly and some were being closed to the public.

The initiative to impose fees on recreational users was first authorized as a demonstration project. But before long, the imposition of fees for the use of federal lands for recreation became widespread. At the time, the AMA had established criteria that any recreational user fee program must meet to prevent opposition from the organization.

The criteria were simple and few: 1) The majority of the revenue generated from the fee must be used locally, where the fee was generated, so that the fee payers were the ones benefiting from their fees. Also, the money could not be siphoned off for administrative purposes

in Washington, D.C.; 2) The fee must be fair and equitable among different user types. So if motorcyclists and ATV enthusiasts were charged a fee, then horseback riders and mountain bikers must be charged a similar fee; 3) The program must take into consideration other fees already being paid by users, such as motor fuel tax and registration fees used to fund the areas through grant funding to the agencies.

Over the years, federal recreation fee programs have at least attempted to keep the fees local to where they are generated. Where the programs have gone off the rails, however, is with regard to meeting the AMA's other two criteria.

Here is an example drawing from my personal experience.



By Rob Dingman

For many years, my colleagues at the AMA and I have ridden the trail systems of the Wayne National Forest. In fact, the AMA has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Wayne in which we

have agreed to work together to ensure rider safety and educate forest users regarding proper respect for the environment.

A few years ago, as part of our partnership with the forest, I agreed to moderate a focus group made up of forest users regarding the recreational fees being imposed on trail users. The Wayne had implemented a significant fee increase that had resulted in less revenue rather than more, and the forest supervisor at the time wanted to understand why. What was determined through the focus group was that the number of trail permits sold was down because non-motorized users had other free opportunities in the area and had chosen not to purchase permits to use the Wayne's trail system.

What was also determined was that while the motorized users had been willing to pay fees, the amount was excessive considering the existing state registration fees and the motor fuel taxes that support the federal Recreational

Trails Program. (The Wayne is a frequent recipient of significant grant funding provided by the RTP.) The motorized users also felt that trail permit fees paid by OHV riders were used to subsidize all other users.

Effective this year, the forest supervisor decided to eliminate the fee for non-motorized users and reduce the fee for motorized users to the previous amount. To soften the blow to motorized users, the supervisor committed to exploring the possibility of providing new single-track trails. As it happens, that particular supervisor was promoted to another job within the U.S. Forest Service and is no longer in charge at the Wayne.

For the last few years, we have organized an AMA staff ride in the Wayne on opening day of the trail system. (United Airlines thwarted my plan to ride on opening day this year, stranding me overnight in Houston on my way back from the MotoGP in Austin.) The ride took place without me, and the report back regarding the experience with the Wayne National Forest staff was not positive. It seems that the ranger who showed up to unlock the gate to the trailhead was a half-hour late from the publicized opening-day time. He also was discourteous while checking to make sure all riders had passes.

Perhaps the ranger didn't get the memo that motorized users were the only ones still paying a fee and maybe he should have acknowledged that with a better attitude. By the way, in addition to the work that the AMA has done to assist the Wayne with their programs, being a former public employee myself gives me license to criticize this federal employee.

My point is that we need to be ever vigilant when it comes to user fees. It is too easy for government agencies to impose fees on our community. We must always keep the above-referenced criteria regarding fees in mind and make sure our public officials hear from us about them.

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