

Canceled forest recreation events blamed on permit costs

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At least three groups with long-standing ties to the Eldorado National Forest have canceled recreation events this year, citing steep permit processing fees required by U.S. Forest Service cost recovery regulations.

Spokesmen for an equestrian group and two off-road motorcycle clubs say their members over the years have created and maintained trails that the Forest Service touts as amenities.

Now they're told they must pay thousands of dollars in nonrefundable fees for environmental assessments with no assurance that they'll receive a permit when the studies are completed.

Mike Fallon, president of the Polka Dots Motorcycle Club, which has sponsored fundraising rides in the Elkins Flat and Gold Note areas for 40 years, accuses the Forest Service of bowing to pressure from environmental groups that want to banish off-road-vehicle sports from the forest.

The club held a Mother's Day ride that typically draws about 300 participants. But it canceled a second event, for 100 to 150 riders, after learning it would have to pay the Forest Service \$37,286 for an environmental assessment required for a five-year permit.

"These fees are essentially creating a barrier and locking out the public from its own property," Fallon said.

Forest Service officials say environmental studies for the events were previously done at taxpayers' expense, and proponents of cost recovery say those who benefit should foot the bill.

"When you look at the state of both the federal and state budgets, why should taxpayers pay for a study that benefits just a few people?" asked Karen Schambach, a Georgetown-area resident and spokeswoman for the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation.

The environmental group closely monitors activities in the forest, and Schambach said the assessments are needed to protect wildlife, soils and water quality.

Cost recovery regulations have been in place since 2006, but many recreational groups are feeling the wallop as permits expire and they apply for new ones.

Spokesmen for the groups said they either were not aware of new regulations, or didn't think expensive environmental studies would be required for events that have been held in the same areas for decades.

"This level of cost recovery was a big surprise," Fallon said.

Eldorado National Forest employees referred questions to Forest Service representatives at regional and national levels who provided e-mail responses.

They said the level of analysis has not changed because of cost recovery regulations, but increased analyses are required under the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment. These include riparian conservation analyses, biological evaluations of plants and animals, and assessments of noxious weeds and compliance with water quality requirements. They stressed that groups can appeal the cost estimates.

The environmental assessments are available for public review and subject to appeal.

The California Endurance Riders Association, an off-road motorcycle club, has held events in the Rock Creek area near Georgetown since the 1970s.

In 2008, it submitted an application for a five-year permit and paid an \$11,000 processing fee. The studies were completed and the permit approved, said vice president Charles Hirst. But the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation appealed the decision, arguing that the analyses were insufficient, and the Forest Service withdrew its approval.

Unable to come up with an additional \$17,000 for further studies, the club canceled this year's events.

"We're out the \$11,000," Hirst said. "The way the law is written, you have to pay the money up front. It's just a gamble."

A spokeswoman for the Auburn-based American Endurance Ride Conference, which sanctions about 800 equestrian events nationwide, said cost recovery regulations are taking a toll on groups throughout the country.

Three weeks before a scheduled July 10 equestrian endurance ride on the Dru Barber Trail northeast of Georgetown, the Gold Country Endurance Riders canceled the annual event it has sponsored since 1993.

President Joe Larkin said the group was notified only a month before the ride that it would have to pony up \$4,230 for the Forest Service to process a one-year permit application.

The group had already paid sanctioning fees and purchased awards for the ride when it learned of the cost recovery fees.

Bill Pieper of Georgetown has been involved with both the Gold Country Endurance Riders and the Tevis Cup Ride, a 100-mile, one-day ride through portions of the Tahoe National Forest.

So far, he said, the Tevis Cup Ride, scheduled for next Saturday, has not been hit with cost recovery fees.

But if recreational groups want to save their events, Pieper said, they likely will have to lobby congressional representatives for relief.

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