Duncan Amendment Assists Recreation Area Sticker Fee

By A. ROBERT SMITH
Mail Tribune Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Congress, after stalling through the spring and summer vacation months, is moving at last toward a new law requiring every citizen to buy an auto sticker from Uncle Sam in order to use federal recreation areas, such as national parks.

Such a sticker would cost about $7 per year, according to government officials who are working on the scheme.

The idea of the new law is to raise revenue for a land and water conservation fund in the federal treasury from which additions to the nation's strained outdoor recreation areas can be financed.

Congress last year refused to create such a fund when the Kennedy administration proposed a motor boat license fee to help bring in revenue. America's growing number of boating enthusiasts protested this idea to Congress — and Congress in effect told the administration to have another idea.

Motor Boat Gas Tax

This year's revamped bill proposes to raise nearly $150 million yearly for the conservation fund through three main sources — nearly $60 million through sale of auto stickers, admission fees and user charges in federal recreation areas; another $60 million from sale of surplus government property; and $30 million by adding 4c per gallon tax on motor boat gasoline.

The surplus property isn't related to recreation in any way, but Interior Secretary Stewart Udall got the administration to agree to allocate revenue from such sales to meet what he calls "the quiet crisis" — the shortage of outdoor public play areas.

The bill is still encountering hostility from certain interests, such as lumbermen who are fearful the fund will be used to expand the national forests by acquiring adjacent private timberland.

The House Interior Committee, before approving a modified version of the administration's proposal, made clear that additions were to be limited to wilderness - type areas of those primarily of value for scenic purposes.

The committee also modified the bill to satisfy hunters and shipping interests that use the nation's inland waterways. The hunters didn't want to have to pay a federal fee to shoot deer or rabbits in national forests or other public land where hunting is permitted in season; and the waterway users feared the bill might be a step in the direction of barges having to pay for using waterways built at federal expense — an oft - repeated proposal they have successfully blocked to date.

Rep. Robert B. Duncan, D-Ore., took care of both these problems with an amendment which states that fees can be charged only in areas where a federal agency has provided recreation facilities or services at federal expense, and that no fee of any kind can be charged for non-recreation use of waters, reservoirs, canals or waterways.

This won't rule out fees for boat-launching ramps, for example, which may have been built along federal reservoirs.

The Duncan amendment helped substantially to swing a 20 to 6 vote in favor of the bill in the House Interior Committee. The same bill has been stalled in the Senate Interior Committee for six months.

As presently envisioned, the auto sticker would admit the auto's occupants to any federal area which charges admission fees. If the visitor didn't have the annual sticker, he would simply pay the admission fee every time he entered such an area. In addition, whether he had the sticker or not, he would pay user charges for such special uses as camp grounds or bathing facilities.

A number of states already have adopted the auto sticker tax idea to raise funds for expansion of state parks. Minnesota pioneered the idea in 1953, starting with a $1 annual windshield sticker. In 1961 the state raised it to $2. Michigan and Wisconsin subsequently introduced $2 state auto stickers in lieu of admission charges to state parks. Illinois had a $2 sticker for nearly five years until it was repealed in 1961 due to public resistance and difficulty of enforcement. Nebraska had a $1 sticker for several years but it was discontinued when other taxes were increased to provide for park improvements.

States Favor Program

The states are virtually all for the new federal program because they will share in the conservation fund. As the bill now stands, 60 per cent of the revenue will be allocated among the states for recreation projects and the balance will be used by federal agencies. To secure their allocations, the states must match the federal grant 50-50.

Cities or counties with park projects can get in on the fund only through the state.

If enactment of the conservation fund doesn't entirely solve the money problem behind the nation's expanding need for more outdoor recreation facilities, it at least promises a steady source of revenue which itself will increase as the number of outdoor recreation users increases throughout the country.

PMT Challenges Law Interpretation

SALEM (UPI) — Pacific Motor Trucking, a subsidiary of Southern Pacific railroad, has challenged the Public Utility Commission interpretation of a law exempting mail carrying vehicles from payment of highway road use taxes.

SP Attorney Oglesby Young claimed the 1961 law, introduced by the late Rep. W. O. Kelsay (D-Roseburg) was intended to exempt any PMT trucks hauling mail between Portland and Ashland from payment of highway use taxes. The trucks operate under contract to SP, which has a contract with the postal service to carry mail over the route.

Young said the PUC is billing PMT $30,000 for mileage run up by trucks used to haul mail and freight interchangeably. He claimed the intent of the law was to exempt mail hauling trucks from all taxes.

The PUC has ruled that if the trucks are used both for mail and regular freight, the tax is applicable.