

# Colorado Springs Gazette

## Tent, matches, compass - wallet?

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For a remote alpine basin, accessible only by one of the roughest fourwheel-drive roads in Colorado, South Colony Basin can get pretty crowded on summer weekends.

Tents cover the valley, and nearly every bush has been turned into a toilet by those who have flocked there to camp and climb the three fourteeners - peaks higher than 14,000 feet - that tower over the frigid lakes, said Mike Smith, forester with the San Isabel National Forest.

"When there are that many people, there are basically people rolling out their tents and putting tents between their cars," Smith said.

To manage the human impact on the fragile basin, which is near Westcliffe in the Sangre de Cristo range, the U.S. Forest Service is planning to close the road a couple of miles below the site, build campsites and bathrooms and - to pay for maintenance - charge a \$5 to \$10 per-person fee to visit the area.

This isn't the only mountain getaway that could soon be more expensive to get away to.

Across the nation, the Forest Service is increasing fees and imposing new ones at campgrounds, trailheads, picnic areas and other sites, as the agency copes with what it says are rising costs without increased funding.

In the Pike and San Isabel national forests, as well as the Comanche and Cimarron national grasslands in eastern Colorado, the agency has identified 66 areas - 17 percent of its recreation sites - where it would increase or start charging fees.

These include popular destinations such as Devil's Head, Guanella Pass and the trailhead for Mount Elbert, Colorado's highest peak.

Hundreds more lightly used campgrounds and other areas could be shut down, including six in the Pike and San Isabel, one of which generates just \$1,000 a year.

"Basically, we're not getting the kind of operational funding to keep up all the necessary facilities. Nobody has, especially the ones that have a significant amount of intensive management," Smith said.

It's a cost-benefit analysis sure to rankle forest users.

"It's public land. It doesn't belong to the Forest Service. It doesn't belong to the (U.S. Bureau of Land Management.) It belongs to the people," said Kitty Benzar, of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition in Durango.

"We all own them in common. They should be places where all people have access and are welcome," she said.

According to the Pike and San Isabel Recreation Facility Analysis, completed in October, many of the forests' facilities are 30 to 50 years old and are at the end of their "useful life," but the agency lacks the money for replacement and repair.

"Yes, they are public lands, but when you go beyond the basics, all of those things - the amenities, the water systems, all those things - they cost money," said Pike and San Isabel spokeswoman Barb Timock.

The fees would range from \$4 to \$5 at trailheads to \$10 to \$15 at campgrounds and picnic areas, officials said. Some sites would be managed by concessionaires while others would have self-service kiosks, with fines for those caught not paying. Several of the new fees proposed are for cabins the agency will make available for overnight rental.

The forests last increased user fees in 2004, by \$1.

"We believe the fees are necessary because we believe they allow us to offer the public the kinds of things they say they like," Timock said. "It is running a business of sorts, and you can't keep a business going for very long without revenue."

The two forests collect little from user fees, just \$21,575 in 2007 from cabin rentals - the only noncampground fees it gets.

Forest campgrounds are run by concessionaires, Rocky Mountain Recreation Corp. and Canyon Enterprises, which return a small portion of their revenue to the Forest Service for maintenance. Last year, the two companies made a combined \$1.1 million - \$91,000 more than in 2005 - and gave \$76,000 to the Forest Service for maintenance, said Neal Weierbach, recreation program manager.

He acknowledged that the Forest Service would like a greater share, because the campground operators only do routine maintenance and cleaning. The agency plans to negotiate new contracts with the companies this year and could get more of the concessionaire revenue, Weierbach said.

The overall operating budget for the Pike and San Isabel has increased over the years, from \$17.8 million in 2000 to \$25.7 million in 2007. The agency estimates the recreational sites are overdue for \$7.2 million worth of maintenance.

Officials said the fee changes here will be implemented over the next five years, though campers, anglers and hikers won't see any increases this summer. They must also be

approved by the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee. A 2004 federal law that gave the Forest Service greater leeway to charge fees, the Federal Land Recreation Enhancement Act, required such boards to be formed to approve any new fees.

The Colorado board, a mix of forest users, outfitters, environmentalists and government officials, held its first meeting in December.

Fee opponents have vowed to go before the board to oppose any new fees or increases.

The 1996 Recreation Fee Demonstration Act first granted the Forest Service the authority to charge fees, and Benzar questions why the agency needs more fees.

"We were told when the fee thing came down the road initially that this was going to save the Forest Service from the annual fluctuations in their budget," she said. "It was going to be the salvation of our national forests. That was 12 years ago.

"The fees are going up. Sites are being closed anyway, and they're still screaming they can't get a handle on their maintenance backlog," she said.

In the Arapahoe and Roosevelt national forests, officials have proposed just five fee hikes, though the forests identified 11 sites for closure.

Meanwhile, in South Colony Basin this summer, the Forest Service expects to install a gate on the fourwheel-drive road 2.5 miles below its end, along with the campsites and toilets. If the fee is approved, it will take effect later in the summer, said Smith, the forester.

He doesn't think the extra cost will deter people.

"I know most of the people that come to climb the fourteeners have the money," Smith said. "They spent hundreds of dollars to do the campout and climb the fourteeners.

"Your bucks are really going to help protect the environment. If there were only 50 people climbing it a summer, we wouldn't have to do this."

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**CHANGES PLANNED IN COLORADO** The U.S. Forest Service has identified dozens of sites in the Pike and San Isabel national forests, and the Cimarron and Comanche national grasslands, where it may begin charging fees or increasing fees; some areas are also targeted for closure.

## **NEW FEES**

- Cabin Cove, overnight cabins

- Crescent Mining
- Camp, overnight cabins
- Crystal Lake, fishing site
- Dawson's Cabin, overnight cabins
- Emerald Lake, picnic site
- Interlaken, overnight cabins
- Mount Elbert trailhead
- Mountain View fishing site
- Sunnyside fishing site
- Chalk Lake fishing site
- Iron City, overnight cabins
- Shirley Site trailhead
- Comanche/Venable trailhead
- Carrizo Canyon, change from picnic site to campground
- Picture Canyon, change from picnic site to campground
- Prairie chicken viewing area
- Rourke Ranch, overnight cabins
- Timpas, change from picnic site to campground
- Vogel Canyon, change from picnic site to campground
- Withers Canyon, change from trailhead to campground
- Pulver Mountain group picnic site
- Bridge Crossing picnic site
- Buffalo trailhead

- Cabin Ridge trailhead
- Devil's Head picnic site
- Devil's Head trailhead
- Duck Creek picnic site
- Dutch Fred trailhead
- Flat Rocks trailhead
- Frog Rock fishing site
- Geneva Basin, overnight cabins
- Geneva Creek picnic site
- Guanella Pass trailhead
- Indian Creek equestrian trailhead
- Kenosha Pass east trailhead
- Little Scraggy trailhead
- Mile and a Half trailhead
- Rampart Entrance trailhead
- Rim Road trailhead
- Scraggy View picnic site
- South Platte trailhead
- Sunset Point trailhead
- Whiteside campground
- Willow Bend picnic site

**FEE INCREASE**

Bassam, overnight cabins

- Lake Isabel recreational rental, lookout and overnight cabins
- Atwood Ponds, fishing site
- Cimarron campground
- Cimarron group picnic site
- Colorado campground

### **PROPOSED CLOSURES**

- Avalanche trailhead
- Bootleg campground
- Southside campground
- Boatman's picnic site
- Green Mountain campground
- Jackson Creek campground

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