

Steamboat Springs (CO) Pilot

Our View: Buff Pass fee makes sense

Sunday, December 20, 2009

Steamboat Springs — The U.S. Forest Service's plan to impose a \$5 day-use fee on Buffalo Pass could be a reasonable measure to address traffic, parking, trash and other concerns at the heavily used recreation area just north of Steamboat Springs city limits. But there's much to be worked out — and deservedly so — before such a fee is put in place.

At the top of that list is how revenues from the fee would be used to improve and maintain the 7,300-acre Buff Pass backcountry area. With 5,000 free day-use permits issued for the area last winter and another 500 free seasonal permits handed out, those revenues could add up quickly. The Forest Service has a draft business plan addressing how those revenues would be spent, but that plan won't be shared with the public until a final version is completed. However, Routt National Forest spokeswoman Diann Ritschard said if fees were approved, the money would be used to improve and possibly expand parking at Dry Lake Campground, provide toilets and additional signage and fund extra patrols of the area.

Forest Service recreation specialist Kent Foster said last week that the proposed fees could be in place as soon as next winter, but that timeline may be optimistic. Any fee proposal first must be approved by the Forest Service Regional Office and by a statewide Recreation Resource Advisory Committee made up of user group representatives.

The fee issue, which has been around for years, again is raising the hackles of local motorized and nonmotorized advocacy groups.

Leslie Lovejoy, director of the Friends of the Routt Backcountry skiers and snowshoers group, says nonmotorized users aren't the problem and therefore shouldn't have to pay.

George Kostiuk, vice president of the Routt Powder Riders snowmobile club, wonders what the Forest Service will provide to justify the fee. Expanded and improved parking areas are at the top of his list.

A Winter Recreation Management Plan adopted several years ago sought to diffuse the angst between motorized and nonmotorized backcountry users. The plan created boundaries separating the user groups, and failure to abide by the regulations can result in fines of as much as \$5,000 and/or as many as six months in jail.

While Ritschard acknowledges that the tension between motorized and nonmotorized users seems to have dissipated in recent years, it probably never will go away completely.

The popularity of Buff Pass — highly regarded for its abundant snow and expansive terrain — isn't likely to wane, either.

That's why it makes sense for the Forest Service to adopt a day-use fee that would result in a better and safer user experience. We also like the idea of a seasonal pass that costs \$30 or \$40 for those regular users of Buff Pass. Fish Creek Falls, currently the only area on the Routt National Forest that charges a day-use fee, provides an example of the good that can result from such revenues. The Forest Service's business plan, when finalized, must clearly outline how and when those revenues will benefit Buff Pass users.