

BUFFALO BULLETIN

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OPINION > LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trailhead parking should be free on public national forests

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Published:
Wednesday, January 20, 2010 2:53 PM CST

Editor

The Powell Ranger District of the Bighorn National Forest has proposed making the popular West Tensleep trailhead into the Cloud Peak Wilderness a fee site. Trailhead fees were tried here in Idaho between 2000 and 2005 on the Sawtooth National Forest. Local recreation users hated the fees and organized to oppose them. One Ketchum activist collected 2,000 signatures in two weeks opposing trailhead fees. We ultimately succeeded in eliminating the fees, but the conflict left a lot of bruised feelings between the community and the Forest Service.

I have talked on the phone with District Ranger Mark Booth. He is a caring and knowledgeable land manager. Please communicate to him that you vigorously oppose an unlawful fee for use of your very own backyard wilderness area. The West Tensleep Trailhead serves as a gateway to undeveloped backcountry for which fees are specifically prohibited no matter what they might build at the trailhead. The trailhead is a parking lot from which wilderness users depart and the Forest Service cannot lawfully impose a fee for parking.

The wilderness-using public would experience understandable consternation, angst, and anger at having to pay \$10 per vehicle per day to use their very own wilderness. Ranger Booth has some legitimate resource management concerns with regard to dispersed camping pressures, traffic, and possible stream pollutants, but a fee would only greatly exacerbate those problems. Vandalism driven by anger could be an unfortunate consequence. People will avoid the fee by parking at and using currently pristine areas. People will go elsewhere and the local economy will suffer. It is important to note that your neighboring Bridger-Teton National Forest has no plans for fees at wilderness trailheads for the Bridger, Gros Ventre, or Teton Wilderness areas.

As a wilderness supporter, common sense citizen, and retired Forest Service professional in outdoor recreation management, I urge you to talk to Ranger Booth about this matter. He is a good listener. I spent 10 years in the '70s on the Bridger-Teton National Forest and I love Wyoming. Access to dispersed recreation needs to stay fee-free on your very own public national forests.

Thank you.

Scott Phillips

Hailey, Idaho

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