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New track for group hikes

BLM changes process for organizations venturing forth en masse

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Hikers who hit the trails of Red Rock Canyon in numbers larger than a dozen are being told by public lands officials they'll need a special recreation permit or written agreement if they want to continue hiking as organized groups.

Bureau of Land Management officials say they want to limit the size of hiking groups to keep them within the agency's definition of "casual use," or risk fines of \$100 or more plus what would be charged for a permit they don't have, at least \$95.

"Any time you pass a threshold of more than 12, that's considered an organized group," said BLM spokeswoman Kirsten Cannon.

She said recreation planners have been providing outreach information to at least one organized group that posts its outings on a Web site, Meetup.com/VegasHikers.

The BLM's objective is to stress the need to preserve the outdoor experience for all visitors at the national conservation area west of Las Vegas and to enhance protection of natural resources, such as springs and riparian areas.

"We're trying to work with the groups and let them know what the rules are and handle it that way," Cannon said.

In a telephone interview last week, Las Vegas Meetup hiking organizer Ed Aleman said hikers have weighed in on the group's message board, expressing viewpoints both in favor of and against the BLM's policy.

"It kind of sucks, but on the other hand, it's good for organized groups to have smaller groups. It can go both ways," he said.

"I do agree with ones who say that the government is ridiculous. They're in charge at the BLM. They can do whatever they want," he said.

Aleman said his group is trying to work with the BLM by carpooling to lessen the burden on limited parking near trail heads and spacing out the time each smaller group leaves for a destination.

In addition, the hiking club is trying to be a responsible user of Red Rock Canyon by adopting at least one trail to clean up litter.

The group's Web site notes that hike organizers "are not tour guides, we're not rangers. Going out with us is the same as going out with a few friends. Expect the same risks, take the same precautions."

Cannon said the requirement for special recreation permits or letters of agreement apply as well to Boy and Girl Scouts and church groups.

Lee Kirk, the BLM's lead outdoor recreation planner for Red Rock Canyon, said his staff gives organized groups "a little bit more leeway" when deciding whether a special recreation permit or letter of agreement is required.

"We have to look at the resource being affected and the amount of people. ... Twelve is the number we're saying is still casual use," he said.

Kirk said that a group of 20 people, for example, would need a letter of agreement or a special recreation permit.

The letter spells out the criteria that would allow hikers in groups to depart a certain trail head in time intervals.

"As long as you do this, this and this you don't need a (special recreation) permit," Kirk said.

He said the BLM has been conducting outreach with organized hikers for the past few weeks.

Under provisions of a written agreement, organized group hikers would pay the normal \$5-per-car one-day pass to enter the scenic drive.

But in the case a special recreation permit is required, a fee of \$5 or \$7 per person, depending on the trail head destination, would be factored into the permit's overall cost. The permit's price tag is \$95 -- or \$5 or \$7 per person -- whichever is more.

The combined fee covers processing, monitoring by BLM staff and insurance. In order to obtain a one-time special recreation permit, the BLM requires an application 180 days in advance of the organized group's activity.

The regulations that deal with casual use and organized groups apply not only to Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area but other BLM lands as well. The number of people who make up an organized group might vary with the particular area they visit.

Contact reporter Keith Rogers at krogers@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0308.

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