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EDITORIAL: Hiking permits

New BLM rules for Red Rock arbitrary

Think you can plan a picnic at Red Rock Canyon with a couple of other families without much trouble? Think your federal taxes and park entrance fees are enough to cover the Bureau of Land Management's maintenance costs? Think you have a right to peaceably assemble at one of Southern Nevada's natural treasures?

You're not thinking like a bureaucrat. Managing public lands means protecting them -- from the public.

If you and your friends number more than 12 people, you're an "organized group" by new BLM standards. That means you need a "special recreation permit," at a cost of at least \$95, to hike together. And you need to apply for that permit at least six months in advance of your excursion. The BLM needs that much time to properly process your application and make sure an agent is on hand to monitor your movements, you see.

Going forward on your excursion without BLM permission and getting caught could cost you a fine of at least \$195.

BLM officials insist these new rules are necessary to create the experience *they* deem appropriate and protect well-defined trails from enduring too many footprints at once.

So 12 people climbing Turtlehead Peak do not have to declare their intent to enter a national conservation area but a group of 13 people enjoying the canyon together must pay more and notify the government of their activities six months in advance, regardless of whether anyone else is on the trail they're walking?

The new BLM rule is arbitrary at best, unconstitutional at worst. And it's ironic that in this time of endless hand-wringing about sedentary lifestyles, an obesity epidemic and the need to get people - particularly children -- outside, the federal government is taking deliberate steps to discourage group hikes at a popular area.

If the BLM wants to replace its per-vehicle admission fee structure at Red Rock Canyon with a per-person model to better maintain the trails and picnic and camping areas, then begin that dialogue with the public. Making all users pay a uniform entry fee is fair. Double-billing a select few is not.

And for goodness sake, expecting the public to plan small group outings six months in advance is preposterous. If the bureaucracy can't turn its wheels faster than that, it shouldn't exist in the first place.

Nevada's congressional delegation needs to make a few phone calls to the local BLM office and tell it to scrap this new "permit" process at once.

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