

Days of free fourteener climbing may be ending

[R. SCOTT RAPPOLD](#)

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Hikers and mountain climbers on the West Coast have long grown used to tight regulations on popular peaks – make a reservation, sometimes months in advance, and pay a fee to climb.

In Colorado, the 500,000 people who climb a 14,000-foot mountain each year just go and climb it.

But those days could be numbered.

The U.S. Forest Service Tuesday unveiled plans to begin charging hikers and backpackers a fee, \$10 per person, per trip to hike and \$20 to camp, in heavily used South Colony Basin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, an access point for four fourteeners. It would be the first permit and fee requirement on a fourteener, with the exception of Culebra Peak, which is privately owned.

“This would be precedent setting,” said Mike Smith, forester with [San Isabel National Forest](#).

It also promises to be controversial, with one group, the [Western Slope No Fee Coalition](#), pledging to fight it.

Near Westcliffe, the basin near timberline is the closest fourteener trailhead to Colorado Springs, after Pikes Peak. [Humboldt Peak](#), [Crestone Peak](#), [Crestone Needle](#) and [Kit Carson Peak](#) can all be climbed from there, and officials say up to 4,500 people visit annually, in an area with no restrooms.

Last fall, the Forest Service banned campfires near the lakes, closed South Colony Road to vehicles 2.6 miles below and built campsites at the closure, where the \$20 overnight fee would also apply. Officials next plan to remove some of the dozens of makeshift campsites in the basin. They say the fees are needed to pay for this and other work in the area and restore the impacts of so many feet on the mountains.

There are no plans to require reservations and limit the number of permits, as is done on popular West Coast peaks like [Mount Whitney](#), but Smith said that could be done in the future if use of the area continues to grow.

With the fourteeners gaining in popularity each year, some have seen this coming and expect to see more such fee and permit proposals.

“As someone who grew up and had formative climbing experience out in the Pacific Northwest ... frankly anyone from Oregon, Washington, California, would be surprised that virtually all the peaks in this state are available without fees, without permits, without registration,” said Lloyd Athearn, executive director of the [Colorado Fourteeners Initiative](#), which does restoration projects on Colorado’s highest mountains.

“I certainly understand the fundamental dynamic pushing this, in that government revenues are flat, a lot of the foundations and public funding programs that have supported this work are maybe not giving as much money now as they were in the past,” he said.

“It’s a really tough decision and we respect the forest service for the tough call they’ve made,” said Becky Reed, director of programs for the Colorado Springs-based [Rocky Mountain Field Institute](#), which has done trail restoration work in the basin every summer for 13 years. “We’re just as interested as everybody else to see what will happen.”

Neither organization has taken a position on the fee proposal.

Kitty Benzar has. As president of the Durango-based Western Slope No Fee Coalition, her group has fought fees for cars on Mount Evans and user fees elsewhere, and she pledged to battle this proposal.

“There are a lot of ways to manage the impacts that are more democratic, that are more fair to those with money and those without money,” she said. “I don’t think any wilderness should charge a general access fee. I think it’s wrong to have to pay to go for a walk in the mountains.”

The [Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee](#), an independent panel mandated by the 2004 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, would have to approve it, and the fees would take effect next summer of in 2012.

The Forest Service is taking public comment on the proposal through the summer. Click [here to comment](#).

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