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## Forest Service weighing plan to require fees from peak hikers

By Jason Blevins  
The Denver Post

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South Colony Lakes Basin or Cottonwood Basin - both areas are included in the new (proposed) fee area for the South Colony Lakes Trailhead. Special to the Post, Bill Middlebrook, 14ers.com ( | )

The toll for scaling some of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks could soon be more than just sweat and aching muscles.

The U.S. Forest Service is floating a plan to charge hikers a fee and require a permit to access the heavily trafficked South Colony Basin, a popular launching point for four fourteeners in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

The proposal would use \$10 and \$20 fees to help maintain \$1 million in recently finished trail improvements and protect the 1,500-acre basin's alpine terrain. And it's being eyed by other land managers struggling with the impact Colorado's 500,000 annual fourteener-climbers have on the mountains.

"If we are successful, there are probably a handful of other places that would be interested in pursuing the same course," said Mike Smith, forester with the San Isabel National Forest, who is gathering public input for his pay-to-play plan. "It's just a proposal at this point. We are running it up the flagpole to see who salutes and who shoots at it."

Smith is ready for the blasting. Knowing that opponents tend to be the most clamorous, Smith said he'd be "ecstatic" if he received "reluctant support" from 20 percent of those who deliver their thoughts on the proposal.

"The Forest Service didn't create the mountains and they have no right to charge to access them," said Kitty Benzar, president of the

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Western Slope No Fee Coalition in Durango, which opposes fees for recreation in unimproved wilderness areas already supported by taxes. "The Forest Service has never shown an inclination toward restraint when it comes to fees. They see fees as a way to discourage use, and that's not very democratic."

If the plan reaches fruition, it would be the first permit program among Colorado's 53 14,000-foot peaks on public land. Culebra Peak, about 30 miles farther south in the Sangre de Cristo range, is privately owned and requires a permit and fee.

## To protect and maintain

The Forest Service, along with help from trail restoration groups like the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative and the Rocky Mountain Field Institute, recently concluded 13 years of work in the basin. The new trails, campsites and trailhead that ease ascents up Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle, Humboldt Peak and Kit Carson Peak need to be protected and maintained.

Smith said requiring permits from mid-May to mid-October and charging day-hikers \$10 and campers \$20 would help pay for both a ranger to patrol the area and upkeep on the new improvements.

If it works, the fees could at least delay the day the Forest Service limits the number of hikers allowed in the basin. Smith said rationing permits is a possibility, especially if growth

continues.



Some of Colorado's fourteeners worry that a fee here and there will lead to fees everywhere. (Bill Middlebrook, 14ers.com/Special to The Denver Post )

The area attracts as many as 4,500 hikers a year and many of them spend a night or two in an area without any restrooms.

Layne Bracy, who has climbed all 54 of Colorado's highest peaks, said the fourteeners climbing community has a minority group that will be hostile toward any new fees.

"The vocal group always sees these things as slippery slopes and with a new fee here or there, suddenly it will be everywhere," said Bracy, of Brighton. "I think that's a somewhat reasonable fear."

San Isabel forest managers knew fees and

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permits would be a tough sell. But times are lean. Government money for Forest Service maintenance isn't increasing, even while demand in South Colony Basin has climbed 3 percent to 5 percent



a year for the past two decades.

"We don't see, in the big picture, that recreation funding is going to be a top priority with all the other issues — the war on terror, health care, saving Social Security and cutting the federal deficit," Smith said.

The South Colony fee proposal requires approval by the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, which reviews all federal agency fee plans in the state. The committee is expected to review the plan in early 2011 and if OK'd, the permit system will likely be installed for the 2012 summer season.

### Thinning the crowds

Steve Hoffmeyer, who has logged 370 ascents up

Colorado's 54 highest hills and runs the climber website [14erWorld.com](http://14erWorld.com), predicted some climbers would avoid South Colony Basin because of the fees. But others would not flinch at paying \$10. The key for many climbers is not the fee, he said, but how the fees are used to administer the area.

"There are certain trailheads that are just ridiculously crowded, so if they make it easy and don't do things like lock gates across roads to trailheads, I don't mind fees at all," Hoffmeyer said. "I think it could keep some of the crowds out."

Fees and permits are commonplace on big peaks in California, Oregon and Washington. Permits help limit the number of users, which protects resources, said Nancy Berry, wilderness coordinator for the San Juan National Forest, which is not considering fees or permits.

"Anyone who manages wilderness knows it's a tool. Is it the best one? I don't know," she said.

The time for such pay-to-play fees has unfortunately arrived, said former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm, a fourteener hiker who a decade ago ominously warned that "we are loving our fourteeners to death."

"America is undergoing reality therapy. There is simply not enough money being generated," Lamm said. "There are no happy options. If we don't do these kind of fees, are we not going to have to close some parks elsewhere?"

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