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Feds consider charging hikers on Colorado peaks

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By The Associated Press

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DENVER | Hikers who tackle some of Colorado's highest peaks could soon face a toll beyond the physical. The federal government is considering charging hikers up to \$20 to access popular mountaintops.

The U.S. Forest Service said it will consider charging permit fees to cover trail improvements at some of Colorado "fourteeners" — or mountains above 14,000 feet.

The Service proposes charging hikers \$10 to \$20 to access trails in South Colony Basin, a popular launching point for four fourteeners in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

"It's just a proposal at this point," said Mike Smith, forester with the San Isabel National Forest. "We are running it up the flagpole to see who salutes and who shoots at it."

Forest officials say half a million hikers a year climb one of Colorado's "fourteeners." They concede most hikers would oppose the fees.

"The Forest Service didn't create the mountains and they have no right to charge to access them," said Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No Fee Coalition in Durango, which opposes fees for recreation in unimproved wilderness areas already supported by taxes.

If approved, the hiker fee would be the first charged on Forest Service land in Colorado. Forest Service officials say hiker already pay permit fees on public lands in California, Oregon and Washington. Privately owned peaks also charge for trail access.

Culebra Peak, about 30 miles farther south in the Sangre de Cristo range, is privately owned and charges hikers \$100. Hikers are on a wait list to access that summit.

Not all oppose charging hikers on Forest Service land. Former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm, a fourteener hiker, ominously warned a decade ago that "we are loving our fourteeners to death."

"There are no happy options," said Lamm, a three-term Democratic governor who served from 1975 to 1987. "If we don't do these kind of fees, are we not going to have to close some parks elsewhere?"

The South Colony fee proposal requires approval by the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, which reviews all proposed federal agency fees in the state. The committee is expected to review the plan in early 2011. If approved, fees would likely begin in the 2012 summer season.

Information from: The Denver Post, <http://www.denverpost.com>

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