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## Walk away from proposal for 14er fee

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Picture it: You're up in the Colorado wilderness. An expanse of wildflowers is bathed in sunlight. A marmot squeaks. The clouds are close enough to touch. Aside from a simple dirt path that leads to the mountaintop, everything is pristine, natural and pure.

Then you come to a toll booth, where a ranger says, "Twenty dollars to pass, please."

The U.S. Forest Service recently proposed charging hikers and campers a fee of up to \$20 to access some fourteeners, the peaks above 14,000 feet. Forest Service officials say fees are needed for maintenance and restoration. The plan, at least initially, would apply to South Colony Basin, an access point southwest of Colorado Springs to four fourteeners. The area is heavily used.

The Associated Press quoted forester Mike Smith as saying of the proposal, "We are running it up the flagpole to see who salutes and who shoots at it."

Ready, aim, fire. This is a bad idea.

Such a fee would mar the experience of heading into the mountains. The sense of freedom that comes with venturing up to the high wilderness would be curtailed, making it feel a little like arriving at an amusement park, as to a degree it does at the entrance to, say, Rocky Mountain National Park.

A fee would limit access to visitors with less disposable income. A family of five would suddenly have to come up with \$100 to camp. That could shut many people out of vast portions of what's now open nature. Let's not forget who the property owner is here. It is the taxpayer, who already shells out for the land year after year.

Supporters of the proposal point out that hiker access fees are routinely charged at popular public lands in California, Oregon and Washington. But that doesn't mean it's a good idea or that it's right for the Rockies. A fee at South Colony Basin could easily lead to fees at other trailheads throughout the state, and then something about the essence of Colorado would be diminished.

Kitty Benzar, who is fighting the fee proposal, told the Colorado Springs Gazette, "I think it's wrong to have to pay to go for a walk in the mountains."

Well put.

The Forest Service should walk away from this proposal.