

Climbing fee proposal raises concerns for hospitality

by Rebecca Tonn

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Could hikers someday soon be asked to pay a fee to climb Pikes Peak?

Proposed Forest Service fees for the South Colony Basin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains already have the 14er and climbing community in an uproar.

The pros and cons of charging people to hike major mountains — Colorado is one of the few western states that doesn't — are many.

Opponents say fees will discourage people from climbing our mountains, a huge draw for the tourism trade. The Forest Service says it needs the money to protect what are national assets.

Each year, about 500,000 people climb one of Colorado's 14ers.

Precise numbers on climbers are unavailable for Pikes Peak, because it doesn't have sign-in sheets at the east-slope Barr Trail trailhead or the west-slope Crags trailhead.

But the year-round caretakers of Barr Camp, Teresa and Neal Taylor, do track the number of hikers to the camp at 10,200 feet. Last year, 23,000 hikers stopped at Barr Camp, Teresa Taylor said. The number of people who hike or summit the mountain each year is believed to far exceed that.

Experience Pikes Peak, the convention and visitors bureau in Colorado Springs, said it hopes it fees don't become widespread.

At the same time, the bureau doesn't think a fee would deter local tourism — that the average traveler who intended to hike or camp on Pikes Peak would still keep that on his or her itinerary.

For now, proposed fees in the South Colony Basin are \$10 per person for day-use hiking, and \$20 per person for camping.

At the moment, fees are not considered for any other areas, said Paul Crespin, district ranger for the San Carlos Ranger District, which includes the San Isabel and the South Colony Basin.

At high altitude, the basin, which is the primary access and launching point for climbing four 14ers — Humboldt Peak, Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle and Kit Carson Peak — is especially vulnerable to over-use.

The Forest Service says it doesn't have the funds to minimize the effects of hikers on the environment.

On average, 4,500 people visit the basin during the summer climbing season, with a 3- to 5-percent increase each year for the past decade or so.

With heavy use, the main system trails are being degraded, climbing routes are being eroded and human waste is a major concern, Crespin said. Fecal chloroform levels in the streams are high. Also, wildlife has become accustomed to humans.

Another issue is the frequency of search-and-rescue calls to the area.

The proposal behind the new fees limits the Forest Service to spending the revenue it collects only within the fee area.

Opponents say that over-use problems need to be resolved without fees.

"There are signs the area is being over-used. But there are better ways to manage over-use than to price people out of using their own public lands, which is what I think this will do," Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, said.

The coalition isn't opposed to a permit system to limit the number of people in the basin at any one time; it just doesn't want permits to cost money.

Crespin said fees would allow the Forest Service to install trash dumpsters on the South Colony access road, do ecological monitoring and continue restoration efforts. The agency has spent \$1 million in the last 15 years for restoration in the affected area.

The earliest the fees could begin would be 2011.

Crespin hopes that between now and then, people will provide meaningful feedback and perhaps suggest other options during the comment period.

"Anything that allows us to see a viewpoint we haven't considered is helpful. We've been racking our heads and giving this a great deal of attention for the last five years. But all the easy things have been done. We are now looking at hard options," Crespin said.

He's well aware of people's consternation about being charged to use National Forest lands.

"(But) I have to (make sure the land is) safe, healthy and sustainable. And that (visitors) don't have to worry about stepping in human waste," he said. "We are trying to figure out what's easiest."

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