

## Public lands fees creating a dispute

### Area users, officials keep eye on San Isabel decision

By **Bobby Magill** • BobbyMagill@coloradoan.com • May 24, 2010

ALBANY COUNTY, Wyo. — Nathan Bartlett is originally from western North Carolina, where he didn't have to pay to hike in local national forests.

Bartlett, who now lives in Aurora, was required to pay \$5 on Saturday morning to hike with his dog at the Vedauwoo Recreation Area in Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest east of Laramie.

Every marked trailhead in the Medicine Bow-Routt's Laramie Ranger District requires people to pay the fee to hike, climb, bike, ski or horseback ride.

The fee, Medicine Bow-Routt officials say, pays for toilets, signs and trail-head maintenance.

On the Colorado side of the same forest, many trail heads remain fee-free.

"I grew up back East, where you didn't have to pay a fee, so I kind of find it annoying," Bartlett said. "It would be nice if they'd provide a map."

Fees to use taxpayer-funded and once free public lands have been a combustible issue for more than a decade since some of the first user fees appeared in the 1990s.

Fees to hike, bike, picnic or spend the day in national forests and parks were made official by a 2004 law allowing public lands managers to implement the user fees to supplement federal funding for toilets, trail maintenance and amenities at trail heads.

Many public lands across Colorado and the West, including those in Poudre Canyon, remain open to all-comers free of charge.

But an announcement last week from a national forest in southern Colorado might portend a future in which users will have to remember to carry extra

cash to the trail head when hiking in Northern Colorado.

Citing lack of funding, unmanageable human waste, expensive searches and rescues, and environmental damage from the increasing crowds of people flocking to the South Colony Basin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains west of Pueblo, San Isabel National Forest officials announced they want to impose a \$10-per-person day-use fee and a \$20-per-person per-trip backcountry camping fee on hikers in the basin.

Most of those people use the South Colony Basin trail head to climb the 14,000-foot Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle and two other fourteeners nearby.

"All the easy options for dealing with this are gone," said Paul Crespin, San Carlos district ranger for the San Isabel National Forest. "We cannot ignore there is environmental degradation occurring and that there are human health and safety issues that we have to address. I cannot ignore those any longer in this basin."

### Pay-to-Play

Such fee programs, often called "pay-to-play," are the future of hiking and other recreation in national forests and parks, even those near Fort Collins, said John Loomis, a natural resources economist at Colorado State University.

Advertisement



**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

**momslike.me**  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

“Parking fees at real popular trail heads like Grey Rock or Hewlett’s Gulch, Blue Lake — that’s the kind of thing I would suspect we’re going to see, partly for revenue for trail management and trail restoration and partly to send signals to encourage people to use less-popular areas,” he said.

No proposal to impose such fees at Poudre Canyon trail heads is on the table today, “but it’s always an option,” Roosevelt National Forest spokeswoman Reghan Cloudman said.

Opponents say the Forest Service isn’t so cash-strapped that it has to require day hikers to fork over money at the trail head.

“We’re a rich enough country; we can afford to let people go for a walk in the woods,” said Dave Scherer of Denver, an outspoken fee opponent. “The Forest Service is acting like another IRS. They’re basically collecting a recreation access tax. You’re creating a redundancy within government.”

The Sierra Club’s regional representative, Roger Singer, who campaigns against user fees, said the trend is clear.

“We’re going to start seeing more user fees at every trail head, camping spot and other public lands areas that are setting up a system of privatizing our public forests,” he said.

As national forests become overused and costs to maintain them increase while budgets decrease or remain stagnant, user fees will proliferate, Loomis said.

“Fees are an opportunity not just to fill that gap in revenue,” he said.

Most of the fee money the Forest Service collects stays at the site it’s collected from, which means “those that are using the site are also investing in the continued maintenance and enhancement of that site,” Deputy Regional Forester Maribeth Gustafson said.

Just last year, the Arapaho-Roosevelt national forests, which is struggling with its budget, took in \$493,000 in user fees collected at Mount Evans and the Arapaho National Recreation Area near Grand Lake, Cloudman said.

But, Gustafson said, any possible lack of maintenance funding in a forest’s budget is “not a driver” for the implementation of user fees.

Those fees also can be used to encourage people to keep away from busy trails and use less-popular areas to relieve stress on overused portions of national forests, Loomis said.

But that could cause environmental damage in lightly used, pristine areas, especially on high peaks, said Lloyd Athern of the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, which works with the Forest Service to maintain environmentally sound access to the summits of Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks.

“Sometimes solving one problem can create another problem,” he said.

If the U.S. Forest Service were to implement such fees in Poudre Canyon, many Grey Rock Trail hikers on Saturday said they wouldn’t have a problem with it, particularly if it pays for toilet and trail maintenance.

“The idea of user fees ... I don’t mind putting more money into the upkeep of the area,” said Jim Tassitano of Loveland.

His hiking companion, Jay DiMartino, added, “In a Utopian world, it would be free.”

Said Tassitano: The fees are especially a good idea

Advertisement

**USA TODAY**  
**AutoPilot** 

The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®

Presented by: 

**SEE HOW IT WORKS >>**

The advertisement features a smartphone displaying the USA TODAY AutoPilot app interface. The screen shows flight information for a USA TODAY Meeting on Sep 21, 2009, including a flight from BNA to IAD, weather for Washington (IAD) as Partly Cloudy, and a link to view a Flickr gallery of Washington. Below the phone, it says 'Articles: Hotel Deals in Hilton Hotels picks'.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

on fourteeners, "so you know who's up there."

Walking with his dog to the Grey Rock trail head, Greg Ferri of Fort Collins said he's "immune" to such user fees, and if a \$3 to \$5 fee defrays the cost of maintenance, "I'm happy to pay it."

### Consistency conundrum

Public lands fees in Colorado and across the West vary dramatically from place to place.

Consider: A day in the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest around Vedauwoo costs \$5 per day or \$30 for an annual pass. In the same national forest, a hike into the Flat Tops Wilderness from the heavily developed recreation areas around Stillwater Reservoir southwest of Steamboat Springs is entirely fee-free.

If you take a day hike from Brainard Lake into the Indian Peaks in Roosevelt National Forest, a private concessionaire will charge you \$9. Just up the road, the National Park Service will ask you to pay \$20 for a week of access to Rocky Mountain National Park, but if you're clambering to climb Longs Peak, it won't cost you a dime because the park doesn't assess its entry fee there.

Yet, most of the Roosevelt National Forest's trails in Larimer County are still fee-free, except for four lakeside recreation areas, where the forest charges \$5 per vehicle for a day pass or \$45 for a season pass.

"There's no consistency right now in what the Forest Service is charging to access these areas," Singer said. "They need to address that issue before they charge additional fees."

Asked why the Medicine Bow-Routt charges fees at Laramie District trail heads but not at Stillwater Reservoir, forest spokeswoman Diann Ritschard said she didn't know.

"Some areas, if there aren't toilets and they don't provide additional services, we don't charge fees," she said.

Consistent or not, Singer said fees for using national forests aren't what public lands are about because they should be available to all people

regardless of ability to pay.

Regardless, Grey Rock hiker Heather Jones of Windsor said paying a fee to hike trails in the national forest wouldn't be so bad if it pays for maintenance.

"But it's nice to come up here and hike and not have to pay to do it," she said. "I guess I can see both sides of it."



Purchase this Photo

A group hikes in Rocky Mountain National Park in May 2007. (Dawn Madura/Coloradoan library)

### File downloads

Map: Entrance fees for use of public space (PDF)

### Advertisement

**USA TODAY**  
**AutoPilot** 

The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®

Presented by: 

**SEE HOW IT WORKS >>**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™