

Boulder Daily Camera

Evans: Fourteener fees? They really do need the dough

By Clay Evans

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I'm the kind of guy tea partiers just hate.

First off, I believe that government plays (or should play) a crucial role in balancing out the wilder excesses of the free market, which, even Ayn Rand-acolyte Alan Greenspan now agrees, doesn't always "regulate" itself.

I believe there are things we can (and should) do together that we can't do alone. (I also am troubled by government's propensity for growth. But I find it fascinating that of recent administrations, only Clinton-Gore managed to shrink it, reducing the federal civilian workforce by 426,000 positions, saving more than \$136 billion and leaving us with a budget surplus.)

I don't mind paying taxes, though I strenuously object to our insanely ginormous military. That budget is just an ammo clip shy of equaling that of all other nations' combined; it is nine times larger than that of China, the next country in line; and after our beloved entitlements, it's the largest single item in the U.S. budget. I abhor our persistent, expensive attempts to make alien nations bend to our will through force.

I believe we've suffered tax-cut fever for so long that we've forgotten that we have to actually pay for things we want -- Medicare ("keep your government hands off my Medicare, you damned, dirty ape!") and Social Security, good public schools and universities, a fair, efficient health-care system.

But we don't want to do that.

Which explains why this month the U.S. Forest Service proposed charging hikers a fee of \$10 or \$20 to climb some of Colorado's fourteeners.

"There are no happy options," says former Colorado Gov. Dick Lamm, who famously said, "We are loving our fourteeners to death" a decade ago. "If we don't do these kind of fees," he says, we're going to have to shutter some public lands.

Why a fee? Because the 54 fourteeners, ever more heavily used, are in need of some TLC. Trails beg for repairs and damage from a million or so booted feet (that's two apiece for the approximately 500,000 climbers each year). Left untreated, crosscuts erode and "wussy paths" -- trails widened by hikers too dainty to step through mud -- continually expand. If every hiker paid \$10 to climb a fourteener, that would raise half a million bucks for much needed repairs.

All things considered, I'd rather we just be grownups and tax ourselves to take care of our public lands. But that seems unlikely any time soon. Tea-partiers and Rand Paul-types sincerely believe the answer is to sell off public lands and let the owners do as they please. They argue that private owners would never, ever do anything to harm their golden goose -- unless, of course, they could make even more dough by gouging or even decapitating "their" mountain.

Which is why I think charging a reasonable fee to climb any fourteener on public land is acceptable. The Forest Service admits the idea is just a trial balloon and as yet only has its eye on trails in the South Colony basin, gateway to Humboldt Peak, Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle and Kit Carson Peak. A fifth fourteener in the region, Culebra Peak, has

long been in private hands and climbers must have a reservation and pay a \$100 fee to make the trip to the top. (I climbed Culebra when it was just \$40 and you didn't need a reservation, but even then the idea that a person or a company could "own" such a majestic mountain seemed wrong, almost obscene.)

Unsurprisingly -- and understandably -- some people object to the idea of handing off \$20 to Uncle Sam to climb one of God's creations. After all, don't we already pay taxes to support this stuff?

"The Forest Service didn't create the mountains and they have no right to charge to access them," says Kitty Benzar of the Western Slope No Fee Coalition.

And, some ask, isn't that discriminatory? Doesn't that place an unfair burden on would-be climbers who are short of resources?

Let's be honest: If you are planning to climb a fourteener, you've almost certainly got a vehicle that can haul it into the high country. You're going to pay for gas, perhaps some camping gear, energy bars, gorp and plenty of beer afterward. Mountain climbing is a pretty thrifty sport, but it's not free.

And anyone who has stood on top of Elbert, Longs, Holy Cross, or the 51 other summits knows that the experience is worth an extra \$10 or \$20 bucks, especially when you're helping the mountains themselves.

Accepting fees-for-use is, I admit, a dangerous road to go down. Once the fees are in place, it might prove difficult to undo them.

But our fourteeners really need the dough. And with any luck, maybe someday we'll reacquaint ourselves with shared responsibility.

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trappist99 66p · 2 days ago

"with any luck, maybe someday we'll reacquaint ourselves with shared responsibility".

Just want to call that sentence out in case people dont read that far down.

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omahaslim 14p · 2 days ago

Clay, you continue to amaze me. You just can't help Republican sniping, even when it has little to do with the subject of the column. Clinton-Gore had little to do with reducing government. That was the result of the 1994 Republican takeover of congress. Beyond that, I agree with your column. Why shouldn't the users pay?

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Flang 69p · 2 days ago

I'd rather see a parking fee or even a larger campsite fee if some fee is really necessary. That way, people who really don't have the money aren't being kept from accessing the mountain. Right now, it sounds like the proposed fee is a little too punitive against those with little cash.

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2 replies · active 15 hours ago



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j_Buttafuoco 70p · 2 days ago

"I'd rather see a parking fee or even a larger campsite fee if some fee is really necessary."

Why would you want to socialize the cost? Isn't it common sense that those that are hiking the mountains should pay the fee? Why would you pass the costs on to others that aren't hiking the mountains? Your position makes about as much sense as Obamacare and it's mandates disallowing high deductible plans. Just make everyone pay instead of the actual users.

I've never been able to understand this type of thinking. Could you clarify why you think the costs should be borne by anyone except the actual hikers of the 14ers?

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Flang 69p · 15 hours ago

Parking fee at the trailhead to the fourteener.
Higher campsite fee at the areas that cater to peak baggers.

Clearer?
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umtanum 95p · 1 day ago

A parking fee at the trail heads is easier to enforce, you don't need rangers trekking all up and down the mountain. Just check the cars for a tag on the dash.

How about reserving one 14er, an easy one like Elbert or Humbolt, and open it up to a competitive bid. So if you want to climb all of them (a silly notion anyway) you have to pay big bucks. That discourages peak bagging and reduces the wear and tear on the rest of them. Face it, if most of them weren't higher than the arbitrary 14,000 ft, they wouldn't be worth the trouble.

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mtn60 53p · 1 day ago

Doesn't a portion of our taxes pay for the USFS, etc ?

Are we getting to the point of having to pay for everything we do anymore?

I am partially against fees.

That said user fees are in effect in numerous local environs i.e Flatirons for out of towners,

USFS camping in established sites.

IF a fee is approved keep it low max \$10 per car not person. as the others have said how do you enforce on a per person level?, They'd send the xtra \$ on ranger OT for just this.

Although look at any Nat Pk and regardless of the entry / user fees etc. People still flock and generate overuse in many of those popular areas.

On another note who are these people dragging in politicians names etc.

This is about access, overuse and fees to manage them.

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BuffChick13 57p · 21 hours ago

".....approximately 500,000 climbers each year"

"If every hiker paid \$10 to climb a fourteener, that would raise half a million bucks for much needed repairs"

How exactly does \$10 per 500,000 climbers equal half a million bucks?

500,000 visitors a year x \$10 = \$5,000,000 a year

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KBenzar 1p · 4 hours ago

Appropriated funding to the Forest Service has increased more than 72% since 2000. Their recreation-specific funding went up \$9 million in the last two years alone. South Colony Basin, where fourteener fees would first be imposed, has had 40,000 volunteer hours and \$1 million in mostly non-federal money spent on it, and the summit trail is in the best, most sustainable, shape its ever been. They do not need the dough. The Forest Service's pattern is to spend appropriated (tax) dollars and/or volunteer resources to spruce up a place, then to start charging a fee to access it or turn it over to a private concessionaire to operate for a profit. They are essentially using our public lands as working capital to set themselves up in the business of selling back to us land that we already own.

Consider what the GAO had to say about Forest Service fiscal accountability in testimony at their FY2009 budget hearing: ". . .the agency has not always been able to provide Congress and the public with a clear understanding of what its 30,000 employees accomplish with the approximately \$5 billion the agency receives every year." (GAO-2009-443t)

And you trust them with your hard-earned cash? Good luck with that.

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