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Counties challenge 'Fourteener Fee'

Colorado's proposed "Fourteener Fee" has been dealt a setback. Two Colorado counties have objected to a proposed fee for climbing four of Colorado's prized fourteeners.

Early this year, the Forest Service announced plans to start charging climbers and hikers a fee – \$10/person to hike and \$20/person to camp – in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains' heavily trafficked South Colony Basin. The Basin accesses four fourteeners, including Crestone Needle and Kit Carson Peak, and would have been the first such fee in Colorado.

However, the new fee is not going on the books without objections. Both Custer County, on the east side of the Sangre de Cristos, and Saguache County on the west, sent letters asking the Forest Service to reconsider due to heavy public opposition.

"We want the USFS to work together with local governments, advocacy groups and our public to find a compromise ... that helps support everyone's needs," the Custer County letter stated.

The moves earned the applause of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which is based in Durango. Kitty Benzar, Coalition president, noted that without the counties' support, the Fourteener Fee stands little chance of survival. "The fee proposal would need to be approved by a statewide advisory committee that is obligated to confirm that it has general public support," she explained. "With both of the affected counties declining to give their support, the Forest Service has little likelihood of getting committee approval."

Opponents also expressed concern that the South Colony Basin fee would be just the first of many for Colorado's fourteeners. "There are better and more equitable ways to manage heavy use, and I hope, now that access fees are off the table, that the Forest will be more open to those alternatives," Benzar said.