

Anticipated Questions and Responses to the South Colony Basin Fee Proposal

We already pay taxes to support the National Forests, charging citizens a user fee to access South Colony Basin is a form of double taxation.

Forest Service appropriated funds have not been sufficient to maintain current recreational services and environmental protections. Revenue from the proposed user fees will help close the gap. Management of recreational use and protection of the environment in South Colony Basin presents many challenges not found in other backcountry locations; such as maintaining costly summit trails, managing social and environmental impacts at campsites, restoring degraded alpine ecosystems, supporting search and rescue operations, dealing with human waste, and providing quality recreational experiences despite high levels of visitor use.

Charging fees to visit South Colony Basin will restrict use by people with lower incomes.

The proposed fees are nominal (\$10-20 per person per trip), compared to the overall cost of traveling to South Colony Basin and acquiring the necessary backcountry clothing and equipment. Based on a study done by C. Keske and J. Loomis in 2006 and revised by G. Lohman (Colorado State University) in 2010; the typical 14'er climber spends an average of \$107 per person per trip for the physical and mental challenges of summiting these peaks surrounded by their spectacular settings. In addition, the study found that 14'er climbers' mean "willingness to pay" was roughly \$180 per person per trip. The difference between 14'er climbers' current trip expenditures and their "willingness to pay" indicate a "consumer surplus" (or net economic value of the experience to 14'er climbers themselves) of about \$70 per person per trip. The additional expense of purchasing a \$10 to \$20 recreation use permit is unlikely to dissuade very many potential visitors from visiting South Colony Basin.

The proposed fees are similar to those charged at other high-use mountaineering destinations.

- Mount Adams, Washington - \$15 per person per trip on weekends or \$10 on weekdays
- Mount Whitney, California - \$15 per person per trip
- Longs Peak, Colorado - for those spending the night, a trailhead campground fee or backcountry camping permit of \$20 per group

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Yes, requiring visitors to obtain permits and pay fees to use South Colony Basin will limit opportunities for spontaneous and unconfined recreation and may impinge on the visitor's sense of freedom from the constraints of society. On the other hand, the services and environmental protections resulting from fee collections could enhance the overall quality of the visitor's experience by offering maintained trails, less potential for aggravation between visitors, and more aesthetically pleasing surroundings.

Charging fees to access South Colony Basin may deflect climbers and their associated impacts into adjacent basins that are currently more pristine than South Colony.

Charging fees in South Colony Basin may cause more peak climbers to access Crestone Needle and Crestone Peak via the Cottonwood or Spanish Creek drainages near Crestone, CO.

Deflecting recreation use to the west side of the Sangres will create resource and trespass problems. These drainages have only informal trail systems that will not support increased use, without causing damage to the environment. Access to these west side drainages involves crossing private property, where no public easement or trailhead facilities exist.

Approaching the peaks surrounding South Colony Basin via the town of Crestone would require 2 to 3 hours (100-160 miles) of additional roundtrip driving time from the Denver or Colorado Springs metro areas. Climbers who choose to avoid paying fees at South Colony Basin by driving around to the western approaches would expend \$10 to \$20 just in added fuel costs.

It is estimated that charging fees in South Colony Basin would increase visitor access through Cottonwood and Spanish Creeks by 5 to 10 groups (10-25 persons) per month during the summer season. However, the private landowners' willingness to allow increasing public access across their property will be the determining factor. Currently it is estimated that about 30 groups (60-80 persons) per month are crossing private property to access the National Forest through Spanish and Cottonwood Creeks.

Charging fees in South Colony Basin may encourage more climbers and campers to access Humboldt Peak through North Colony Basin. North Colony Basin is a comparatively pristine basin with only an intermittent trail at its upper reaches, few established campsites, and excellent opportunities for solitude. Increasing recreation use could disrupt these opportunities for solitude and create more impacts to the relatively pristine environment of North Colony Basin through the establishment of new user-created campsites and trails.

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The Forest Service is intentionally using fees to discourage recreation use in South Colony Basin.

The proposed fee system could function as a self-limiting method for reducing recreation use levels and the associated impacts in South Colony Basin. Some potential visitors may avoid South Colony Basin out of resentment over having to pay fees to access public lands that were previously free of charge. However, the Forest Service's primary purpose for initiating fees in South Colony Basin is to maintain the summit trail systems and protect the environment from increasing recreational impacts. The proposed fees are nominal, compared to the overall cost of traveling to South Colony Basin and acquiring the necessary backcountry clothing and equipment, and are unlikely to dissuade very many potential visitors.

The Forest Service is proposing these fees as a lead-in to a limited quota permit system.

If social and physical impacts to South Colony Basin continue on an upward trend after implementing the proposed fees, then a limited-quota permit system could be the next step to bring South Colony Basin into compliance with Forest Plan guidelines. Implementing a limited-quota permit system would require establishing a "carrying-capacity" for the Basin that is tied to either an overall cap on visitor numbers or a more dynamic approach based on indicators and thresholds for impacts the physical / biological environment, and possibly the recreational / social experience desired by visitors. Future NEPA analysis, including opportunities for public involvement, would be required before any limited-quota permit system could be implemented.

South Colony Basin appears to be in much better condition than what the Forest Service has described. I really don't see all the recreational impacts that need fixing.

Discrepancies frequently exist between visitor and manager perceptions. Several studies have documented that visitors frequently perceived lower levels of environmental impacts and depreciative social behaviors than did park or forest managers. It is part of our responsibility as managers to deal with problems before they become readily apparent to the general public.

Many of the recreation related impacts in South Colony Basin are not readily apparent. For example, fecal bacteria in streams and lakes can only be measured through laboratory testing. Changes in bighorn sheep behaviors caused by their seeking-out salt from human urine deposits are not apparent to casual observers. Recent visitors to South Colony Basin have no perception of how severe and widespread the damages to the natural landscape were, prior to the intensive restoration efforts of the past 15 years. In 1995, the route between Upper Colony Lake and the saddle on Humboldt Peak was for the most part a ½ mile long erosion scar 5-15 feet wide and 3-6 feet deep. This eroded gully route has since been filled, stabilized and landscaped with over 200 tons of rock (moved by hand and gravity-operated aerial tram) and hundreds of alpine turf transplants. Today, it appears to be a natural talus flow in the eyes of most visitors.

How do I register my comments regarding this proposed fee system?

In the 2005 legislation re-authorizing recreation use fees, Congress required the creation of independent Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRAC) for the specific purpose of reviewing federal agency recreational fee proposals within a region or state. The Colorado RRAC is made-up of individuals, outside of the Forest Service, who represent the various recreational uses of public lands in the state. A definite date has yet to be scheduled for the Colorado RRAC's review of this South Colony Basin fee proposal, but it will likely be considered between January and April of 2011.

The collection of fees is not an action covered by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). However, the RRAC approval process does solicit and consider public input. Comments or concerns about the proposed fee levels, the methods for obtaining a permit, or how the revenues will be used in South Colony Basin should be mailed to:

San Carlos Ranger District
Attn: Mike Smith
3028 E. Main Street
Canon City, CO 81212

Additional information, a map of the proposed fee area, and an electronic comment form can be found at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/sanc/>