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Not Happy Campers

Enjoy hitting the trails in the Sangre de Cristos? Soon, it may cost you, a situation we assume will not please many campers.

U.S. Forest Service officials told the Custer County Commissioners yesterday that it is now moving ahead with plans to charge users fees in the South Colony Basin area here. The agency is now accepting public comments on the proposal.

The Forest Service has been dropping hints for years that it could initiate a pay-to-hike system in portions of the Sangres. In his presentation in Westcliffe on Wednesday, District Ranger Paul Crespín said the Forest Service's preliminary fee proposal would require visitors to obtain a special recreation permit to access South Colony Basin and the adjoining summit trails. The proposed fee would be \$10 per person per day for day trips, and \$20 per person per trip for overnight trips. Those under the age of 18 would not be charged, and the fees would likely be charged between mid-May and mid-October each year.

In a prepared statement, the Forest Service says South Colony Basin "presents ... many challenges not found in other backcountry locations, such as maintaining costly summit trails, restoring degraded alpine ecosystems, supporting search and rescue operations and dealing with human waste."

To be sure, South Colony is probably the most used—and some would say abused—trail in the Sangres. The Forest Service says trailhead register data indicates 3,500 to 4,500 persons visit the small basin each summer season, with most visitors coming from along the Colorado Front Range. On average, 30 to 50 persons are on the trail on summer weekdays, with that number climbing to as many as 150 on typical weekends, and 200 or more on peak weekends.

In recent years, the Forest Service has worked with other non-profit groups to reconstruct trails, restore eroded slopes and make other improvements. With federal funding for such projects expected to wither even further, the fee system would provide needed cash.

It's expected that the Colorado Recreation Resource Advisory Committee will possibly review the proposal in early 2011.

For questions about the proposal, and how to submit public comments, contact Mike Smith at the San Carlos Ranger District at 3028 E. Main in Canon City, phone 269-8500.