

Proposed overnight fee in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness widely opposed by public

More than 1,600 people submitted comments to Forest Service

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Scott Condon [FOLLOW](#)
scondon@aspentimes.com



Geese swim in Maroon Lake after a snowfall in Aspen on Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2021. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

The public supports a quota system in parts of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness but a fee was widely opposed in hundreds of comments submitted to the U.S. Forest Service.

The White River National Forest accepted comments through mid-September on the proposed fee system that would cover some of the most stunning sites in the wilderness area outside of Aspen, including the popular Four Pass Loop backpacking route.

Wilderness Watch, a conservation group based in Missoula, Montana, [led the charge](#) in support of the reservation and permit proposal but against the fee.

“Wilderness Watch supports quotas to reduce impacts and protect wildlife and solitude for visitors, so we feel the Forest Service is justified in proposing quotas in this case,” Wilderness Watch wrote on its website. “However, turning the quota system into a plan to charge \$12 per day to visit Wilderness is both inappropriate and illegal.”

The White River National Forest [unveiled its proposal](#) in July to implement a reservation and permit system along with a \$12 fee for overnight camping along the Four Pass Loop, the upper Capitol Creek Valley and Geneva Lake. The proposal would also impose the \$12 fee at the Conundrum Hot Springs where reservations are already required.

The fee for backpackers would apply from May 1 through Oct. 31. Reservations would be required through recreation.gov, which would charge a \$6

processing fee on each reservation.

The Forest Service said the reservation system is needed to [ease the environmental degradation](#) occurring in the wilderness “hot spots.” The agency said it must charge the fee to hire more rangers to patrol the wilderness and enforce the restrictions. Officials contend they can impose the fee under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

Wilderness Watch counters that a fee cannot be charged simply for walking or riding a horse through wilderness.

“The fees are another part of the effort to commercialize Wilderness, and would exclude the public from accessing and enjoying their public lands,” Wilderness Watch said on its website.

The organization effectively rallied its membership to weigh in on the debate. The Forest Service posted 1,625 public comments in its “public reading room” and another 10 comments were submitted outside that online forum, according to White River public information officer David Boyd. Out of that total of 1,635 comments, roughly 800 were form letters, according to the filter available at the reading room. While not all the form letters were submitted by Wilderness Watch members, many were, according to a spot check by The Aspen Times.

Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, did a thorough sampling of the comments to capture the mood of the public. Benzar is a longtime critic of fees to access public lands. She opposes the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness fee but said she didn’t try to rally her troops.

“I’ve become cynical and jaded about ever making a difference,” she said. “The Forest Service just goes ahead and does whatever it wants regardless of what the public wants.”

Curiosity got the best of her so she took a representative sample of the 1,625 comments posted in the online reading room by examining every 10th comment. She categorized them as supportive or opposed to the fee and, separately, if they indicated support for a quota system and requirement for reservations.

“The bottom line is that 14% support a fee while 83% opposed it,” Benzar wrote in her analysis. “About half of all comments specifically said they support a quota/permit system to limit use, but many of those oppose charging a fee.”

Boyd said the White River staff is analyzing the comments.

“We will have some internal review and discussions once that analysis is complete,” he said via email. “We can modify the proposal based on public comment, but not increase the amount that was proposed. If we move forward following our comment analysis, we could see the overnight permit fee program in place for the 2022 season.”

The comments can be found at <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/ReadingRoom?project=NP-2849>.

A sample of the comments shows opponents fear charging a fee will price some people out of visiting the backcountry.

“This is a real shame. Why do I pay tax dollars if I then have to pay money for all of these permits and reservations?” wrote Emma Ely, no address given. “Visiting the outdoors is becoming an elite activity only the rich can afford.”

Proponents said reservations and the fee were necessary to prevent environmental damage.

“I’m in favor of the fees in order to halt the continuing degradation of this particular resource,” wrote James Kell, no address given. “Maroon Bells is an exceptional resource deserving exceptional care, and these funds are necessary to protect the resource from those people who have only recently discovered it and the outdoors in general.”

Some Aspen-area governments and conservation groups also submitted comments.

Juanita Rinas acknowledged the need for funding, but not through a fee paid by backpackers.

“I do, however, agree that there need to be improvements, and funding for maintenance, rangers, signage, and waste and trash removal. These funds should come from tax dollars, not fro fees to individuals for use of public lands,” Rinas wrote.

Michelle DeLaria presented a different perspective, calling for an even higher fee.

“The \$12/per person per night fee is still too low, but it will certainly help manage the increasing impact, protect and restore the resource,” she wrote. “I also support limiting raw numbers of visitors to these overused areas. I support increased Forest Service personnel in these areas, programs that teach visitors no trace ethics and practices, restoration, protection and enforcement.”



Local organizations weigh in

The governments of Pitkin County and Aspen submitted comments on the reservation and fee proposal in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, as did Wilderness Workshop, the oldest homegrown conservation advocacy group in the Roaring Fork Valley.

Wilderness Workshop submitted comments as an organization and also sent in one file with comments from 45 separate members. It was unclear if that file was counted as one or 45 comments.

In its comments, Wilderness Workshop expressed concern over locals not being able to backpack in their backyard.

"We encourage the Forest Service to consider options for the fee system that would help ensure local residents can continue enjoying the Wilderness Area, such as an annual pass," the group wrote.

The conservation group is also concerned about equity of the system and pricing some people out of wilderness use.

In addition, Wilderness Workshop is concerned that charging the fee in the areas with traditional high use will just push people who cannot get a permit into other areas of the wilderness that currently have less visitation and fewer impacts. It called on the Forest Service to monitor and publicly report on the impacts of the system and what was accomplished with the fee revenues on an annual basis.

The Pitkin County commissioners commented that visits to the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness have nearly tripled in the past decade. The wilderness is suffering consequences from heavy overnight use such as trash and waste, user conflicts and loss of vegetation.

"Fees would fund restoration of heavily damaged areas, increased ranger presence, increased public education, improvements to trail access and expansion of the wildlife safety program," the commissioners wrote.

Based on their understanding of their proposal, they said they would endorse it, but they fear the fee could have "an inequitable effect on the ability of all populations to access our public lands." The county wants the Forest Service to consider ways to remove cost barriers for those who "find them insurmountable" and offered to partner in such as effort.

The city of Aspen's comment mirrored those of Pitkin County – support for the proposal but urging the Forest Service to assist those who cannot pay.

scondon@aspentimes.com

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