

Overnight fee, reservations on hold until 2023 for Four Pass Loop, other popular destinations

Forest Service says more time needed to work on proposal, educate public

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A couple cozies up in view of the Maroon Bells at Crater Lake on a cool morning on Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. Crater Lake is the gateway to many popular destinations in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

A fee and reservation system for overnight visitors on the Four Pass Loop and other popular destinations in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness won't be implemented as planned this summer, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

"The reality is the timeline to get that (system) approved and in place for summer 2022 was probably on the rosy end of the spectrum," Aspen-Sopris District Ranger Kevin Warner said.

The reservation system, which would limit visitors, and fee are viewed as a way to ease [overcrowding and related environmental damage](#).

Even if the regional and national offices of the Forest Service signed off on the proposal this spring, it would have been difficult to implement it and educate the public in time for the backpacking season, Warner said.

It became apparent while discussing the proposal with the regional office that implementation this summer was not feasible, Warner said.

The Aspen-Sopris Ranger District wanted to implement the fee and reservation system for the Four Pass Loop, Lake Geneva and Capitol Creek Valley. There is already a [reservation system in place for Conundrum Hot Springs](#). The Forest Service intended to start charging a fee this summer but that is also delayed.

"We're going to be targeting summer 2023," Warner said.

The White River National Forest approved the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Overnight Visitors Use Management Plan in 2017. That review paved the way to implement fees and reservations as needed to protect the outdoor environment. The Aspen-Sopris Ranger District took an additional step this winter by seeking public comment on the proposed fee and reservation system for the Four Pass Loop/Geneva Lake, Capitol Valley proposal. The Forest Service received [1,600 comments](#).



“We received more than we anticipated,” Warner said. “The reason it is taking so much time is we’re considering each one of them.”

The comments will be analyzed to see if points raised warrant altering the proposal.

A significant portion of the commenters endorsed a quota system but opposed the fee.

That creates a problem, Warner said, because the only way the Forest Service can implement and enforce the system is by generating funds through the fee.

Under the proposal, wilderness rangers would work in the highly traveled areas in the wilderness to designate camping sites and reclaim old sites in unsustainable areas. The fee would also generate revenue to work on repairing the environmental damage caused by years of overcrowding.

“From 2006 to 2020, the number of overnight visitors to the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness destinations quadrupled, resulting in large-scale environmental damage including unburied human waste, trash, dangerous human and wildlife interactions, visitor conflict and crowding, and total loss of vegetation that when added together is roughly 39 acres – the size of over 35 football fields,” according to material prepared on the proposal by the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District staff.

Every summer, the wilderness ranger crew hauls out hundreds of pounds of trash left in the backcountry and buries a significant amount of [human waste](#) that was either left in the open or improperly buried.

The wilderness rangers will focus on the high-traffic areas again this summer to try to coax compliance with Leave No Trace principles. The district planned for eight crewmembers this summer but so far has only been able to hire five. The White River is trying to fill several positions (see fact box).

Warner said there is no reason to believe the trend for increased overnight visitors will ease this summer.

Work in the Forest

The White River National Forest is trying to fill about 30 permanent full-time and permanent seasonal positions as part of a national hiring event that closes April 19.

Positions are available in the Roaring Fork Valley as well as Meeker, Minturn, Rifle and Silverthorne.

In the Aspen-Sopris District, there are multiple openings on the recreation crew, positions on the wilderness crew and the ski area ranger role. The person of contact for more information on the openings is Shelly Grail, shelly-grail@usda.gov.

Applications are only accepted through <http://www.usajobs.gov>. Review the job announcement carefully for deadlines and required information to include in your application. Employment start dates and duty locations vary.

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