

Buffalo Pass access fee in the works

Charge for backcountry permit expected for winter 2010-11

By [Joel Reichenberger](#)

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Steamboat Springs — A typical winter weekend morning at the Dry Lake Campground parking lot that serves as a winter access point for Buffalo Pass is the kind of mess that would drive a neat freak crazy. Trucks with long trailers quickly overflow the available parking and are lined up alongside the road before the sun climbs very high in the sky.

Snowmobiles zip around as dozens of riders load skis and snowboards and fuel up their machines.

It's no mystery to U.S. Forest Service recreation specialist Kent Foster as to why, either.

"Traditionally, that area gets the most snow in the state," he said. "When the ski area reports a foot, it gets 2 feet up there. ... You get a chance to ski powder snow waist deep or higher pretty much daily."

A backcountry permit made available for free at the Forest Service's Steamboat office and at the Buff Pass trailhead has been required for years, but the powder-hound magnet that the area has become has encouraged officials to institute a fee, as well.

Foster said that long-discussed idea could go into effect next season. A daily pass would cost \$5 and a season pass could be purchased for \$30 or \$40.

"We are planning on charging in the future ... next year, for 2010-11," he said Thursday morning.

That's not an idea that sits well with representatives from groups that frequent Routt County's most well-known backcountry powder stash.

Leslie Lovejoy, director of the Friends of the Routt Backcountry nonmotorized skiers and snowshoers group, and George Kostiuk, vice president of Routt Powder Riders snowmobile club, said they have reservations about the fee.

"As skiers, our reaction is that we don't feel like we should have to pay because we're not impacting anything to use that area," said Lovejoy, who said the onslaught of snowmobiles has pushed her to find new areas to recreate. "We don't cause that much of a problem, but they have to manage the motorized use so they have to charge money. We're not thrilled at having to pay."

Kostiuk said he gave up skiing once he started riding a snowmobile more than 30 years ago and used to love trips to the Buff Pass area. He said even though you rarely see anyone else once you get away from the parking lot, the congestion in that lot has limited his trips.

"The only good parking lot (the Forest Service) has is up at Columbine. That's the only place where you can find a spot and don't have to get there at 8 a.m. or 6 a.m. or the day before to park," he said. "My question is, what are they going to provide? What are they doing that deserves a fee?"

Those concerns aren't new to Foster, however, and he said he hopes the Forest Service's plans alleviate users' concerns.

He said about 5,000 day-use permits are used every winter and he sees no reason why that would change with a small fee. That adds up to about \$25,000 in new revenue that could be plowed back into the area.

Kostiuk would love to see an expanded and reconsidered parking lot.

"One of the biggest problems is the design of it," he said. "You can't get in and out of them a lot of the times. The way they are made is just not efficient."

Lovejoy, meanwhile, called for an entirely new parking lot, one that would help separate the riders from hikers and skiers.

“That seems reasonable to ask,” she said. “It would be nice to be able to park our vehicles where there weren’t a bunch of snowmobiles around. We don’t like the smell or the noise.”

Foster said anything’s possible.

“The money that would be collected from this would go back into the management of it and to make improvements to the parking,” he said. “In addition to the parking, we have some sanitation concerns and this would help us fund some improvements to that and to the traffic flow in the area.”

Whatever happens, no one expects interest in the area to subside.

“The quality of the skiing up there, it’s different than the ski area,” Foster said. “The backcountry experience is different, and Buffalo Pass is one of the ultimate places. To be this close to town and have that access, it’s pretty incredible.”