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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **AN ESTIMATED 415,000 PEOPLE HIKE COLORADO'S 14ERS IN 2020 PANDEMIC SURGE CAUSES 44% ONE-YEAR INCREASE IN USE**

(Golden, Colo.) The number of people climbing a 14,000-foot peak in Colorado last year surged by 44 percent to an all-time high of 415,000 hiker use days, according to the most recent hiking use report released today by the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative (CFI). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in record use levels on many public lands as people sought the relative safety of recreating outside and distanced from other people. The comparison with 2019 (288,000 hiker days) was made starker by lingering snowpack and avalanche debris-choked roads in the first half of that season. When compared to the 2018 prior high of 353,000 hiker days, the 2020 season total was up 18 percent. The statewide economic impact of hiking Colorado 14ers in 2020 was \$112.5 million based on past 14er hiking use expenditure studies.

“The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in record hiking use of Colorado’s 14ers, as well as significant changes in when and where people climbed peaks,” said Lloyd F. Athearn, executive director of CFI. “Whether due to more flexible work schedules or trying to avoid crowded trails, hiking use increased on weekdays (52.1% of weekly use), but declined on weekends (47.9%). Hiking use also increased substantially in the San Juan Mountains, Sawatch Range and Mosquito Range as people appeared to disperse their activity to less-frequently climbed peaks.”

Hiking use continues to be concentrated on the 11 peaks closest to the Denver metro area, though the share of use on these peaks dropped 6 percent compared to 2019. Fifty-one percent of statewide use occurred on the 11 peaks closest to the Front Range in 2020, down from 57 percent the prior year. The closure of the Mount Evans road was a significant factor in this reduction, as was growth in hiking use in the Sawatch and San Juan Ranges.

After two seasons with very close use levels, Quandary Peak blew past Mount Bierstadt in 2020 to claim the undisputed title as the most-climbed Colorado 14er by almost 11,000 hiker days (49,179 vs 38,204). CFI’s trail counter on Quandary’s east ridge route captured 100 percent of the estimated hiking season. A CFI trail counter was installed on Bierstadt in mid-July, which captured data for 63 percent of the season. Early season data on Bierstadt was modeled. Between June 20 and September 7 (Labor Day), Quandary Peak saw only five days in which fewer than 200 people climbed the peak.

The route up Grays and Torreys Peaks saw almost 31,000 hiker days, while the route encompassing Mounts Democrat, Lincoln and Bross had total use of more than 29,000 days. (Note: The actual summit of Bross is closed due to private land issues, but hikers were permitted on a bypass loop route near the summit).

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Hiking use continued a three-year trend of shifting away from weekends and towards weekdays—particularly Wednesday through Friday. Almost 48 percent (47.9%) of use occurred on weekends, while 52.1% of use occurred on week days. Nevertheless, Saturday continues to be the highest-use day (28.3%), followed by Sunday (19.6%), Friday (14.1%), Thursday, (10.2%), Monday (9.9%) and Wednesday (9.8%). Tuesday has the lowest share of weekly hiking use (8.1%).

Last year CFI expanded its counter network to 23 locations with the addition of Bierstadt. Counters that had observed data for more than 90 percent of the season included Pikes (100%--Devil's Playground), Quandary (100%), La Plata (99%), Grays/Torreys (94%) and Democrat (92%). Counters that collected between 60 and 90 percent of the season included: Huron (89%), Challenger/Kit Carson (83%), Princeton (73%), Blanca/Ellingwood (70%), Lindsey (68%), Handies (66%--Grizzly Gulch and American Basin), Redcloud/Sunshine (65%), Bierstadt (62%), Sneffels (61%) and Wilson Peak (61%). Counter malfunctions or blockages limited data collection from the counters on Castle and Elbert (Northeast and East Ridge counters).

Colorado was the fourth-fastest-growing state between 2010 and 2019, growing its population by 14.5 percent. The Denver metro area has grown nearly 15 percent during the same period. In-migration was highest for those aged 24-32, the prime age for fit, outdoor-oriented people to be exploring Colorado's high peaks.

CFI's estimate of hiking use suggests a statewide economic impact of more than \$112.5 million directly attributable to hiking 14ers based on economic expenditure studies performed by Colorado State University economists John Loomis and Catherine Keske. Their 2009 study found that climbers of Quandary Peak near Breckenridge spent an average of \$271.17 per day for gasoline, food, lodging, equipment and other retail purchases.<sup>i</sup> This expenditure estimate has not been updated in almost a decade, so it is likely understated.

"While growth in 14er hiking on some peaks has been dramatic during the past few years CFI has been tracking use, that does not necessarily translate into increased on-the-ground resource impacts," said Athearn. "In many places our investments in trail construction and maintenance mean the summit trail is in better condition despite significantly increased hiking use."

For example, the condition of the main Quandary Peak summit trail increased from a C+ grade in CFI's 2011 baseline assessment to an A- in the 2018 secondary assessment. Despite accommodating many more hikers in 2018 than 2011, the investment of more than \$223,400 in seasonal staff wages and 1,322 volunteer days actually improved the on-the-ground trail condition according to CFI's 2019 "14er Report Card."

"The challenge is building out and maintaining the network of sustainably designed, durably constructed summit hiking trails—CFI's top priority—before hiking use impacts make this harder and more expensive to do," said Athearn. "If we can provide a robust network of 14er hiking trails that protects the fragile alpine tundra ecosystems through which these trails pass we can protect these signature Colorado peaks while helping foster recreational enjoyment and economic development for years to come."

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CFI's hiking use projections are based on the combination of several data sources. 1) CFI collected hour-by-hour data during the 2020 hiking season using compact infrared trail counters that were placed at 23 locations adjacent to summit hiking trails servicing 21 14er peaks. Hiking use is estimated for the period between May 26 and October 12. Missing data were modeled using a linear model incorporating week number, day of the week, holiday and use levels on other similar peaks, which has shown to be statistically accurate. 2) Hiking use projections for all other 14ers were based on crowdsourced "14er checklists" submitted to the 14ers.com website by more than 20,000 individual hikers. Estimates for peaks without trail counters were calculated using a trend line calculated by the relative frequency of reported hiking use on all peaks using data points as anchors for peaks that had trail counters in 2020.

CFI began deploying compact infrared trail counters as part of a pilot program in 2014 at five locations: Grays/Torreys, Castle, Quandary, Redcloud/Sunshine and Handies Peaks (American Basin). The program was expanded in 2015 to five additional locations: Mounts Elbert (3 locations), Democrat and Handies Peak (Grizzly Gulch). Additional funding in 2016 allowed CFI to add 10 new monitoring locations: Mounts Sneffels, Sherman, Princeton, Antero and Shavano, La Plata, Huron and Wilson Peaks, Challenger Point/Kit Carson Peak and Blanca Peak/Ellingwood Point. In 2017 the Antero counter was moved to the Winfield approach to La Plata Peak. In 2018 two new counters were deployed on Pikes Peak (Barr Trail and Devil's Playground), while the La Plata (Winfield) counter was moved to the West Ridge of Quandary and the Princeton counter was moved to Mount Lindsey. In 2020 West Ridge of Quandary counter was moved to a new, better location on Mount Princeton, while a new counter was deployed to Mount Bierstadt. Hiking use is being monitored at 23 locations during the 2021 summer/fall hiking season.

CFI uses the term "person days" to report hiking use on the 14ers. This represents one person hiking one peak on one day. Anecdotally we know that individual enthusiasts may hike multiple 14ers over the course of a given year, including climbing the same peak multiple times. Using "person days" reports the number of days of hiking use that occurred but does not represent the number of individual people who hiked 14ers that year.

**About Colorado Fourteeners Initiative.** CFI was founded in 1994 to preserve and protect the natural integrity of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks through active stewardship and public education. To date CFI has constructed 39 sustainably designed, durably built summit trails on 35 14er peaks. CFI has engaged more than 19,300 days of volunteer stewardship since 2001 in the construction and maintenance of these peaks. A multi-pronged educational strategy has contacted more than 190,000 hikers in the field through paid crews and volunteer Peak Stewards, while CFI's YouTube channel contains more than 70 educational videos that have been viewed more than 304,000 times. Learn more at [www.14ers.org](http://www.14ers.org) and obtain frequent updates on Facebook.

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<sup>i</sup> Loomis, John and Catherine Keske, "Did the Great Recession Reduce Visitor Spending and Willingness to Pay for Nature-Based Recreation? Evidence from 2006 and 2009," *Contemporary Economic Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2, April 2012, pp. 238-246.