



July 28, 2022

Contact: Lloyd F. Athearn, Executive Director
Office: (303) 278-7650
Mobile: (720) 556-6166
Email: lloyd@14ers.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AN ESTIMATED 303,000 PEOPLE HIKE COLORADO'S 14ERS IN 2021 CLOSURES, ACCESS ISSUES, WILDFIRE SMOKE CAUSED 27% DROP IN USE

(Golden, Colo.) The number of people climbing a 14,000-foot peak in Colorado last year fell by 27 percent to 303,000 hiker use days, according to the most recent hiking use report released today by the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative (CFI). Access and parking restrictions at several of the state's most popular 14ers near the Front Range saw an even higher drop. Included was a 65% decline in estimated climbing use in the Mosquito Range that includes the popular Decalibron Loop (Mounts Democrat, Cameron, Lincoln and Bross bypass) that was closed by the private landowner between May 1 and August 6. The statewide economic impact of hiking Colorado 14ers in 2021 was \$82.2 million based on past 14er hiking use expenditure studies.

"The pandemic boom in 2020 was followed by a significant bust in 2021, as trailhead communities looked to control parking, landowners closed access due to liability concerns, other recreational options opened up as the pandemic lessened, and wildfire smoke choked off visitation mid-summer," said Lloyd F. Athearn, executive director of CFI. "More than half of 14ers in the ranges closest to Front Range population centers faced some sort of access restriction. This contributed to the largest drop in 14er hiking use statewide, an estimated 69,000 hiker use days. However, use fell the least in the Sawatch Range (-13%), suggesting that people unable to climb on closer ranges drove farther to climb 14ers that were not affected by restrictions."

Despite parking restrictions at the main trailhead starting on July 30, Quandary Peak remained the most climbed 14er in Colorado in 2021, with an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 hiking use days (best guess = 35,000 days). Use on Quandary dropped 29% from an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 days in 2020. Mount Bierstadt, which faced no access restrictions, again took second place with an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 days (best guess = 32,000 days). This was down from an estimated 35,000-40,000 in 2020. The Grays and Torreys Peaks combined route tied for third place with Mount Elbert in a range of 20,000 to 25,000 use days (best guess for both routes = 22,000 days). Clear Creek County posted "no parking" signs along the Stevens Gulch Road to Grays/Torreys last year and cited violators. This forced many people to park near I-70 and hike the 3.5-mile-long road, contributing to lower use levels. The Grays/Torreys route in 2020 saw 30,000 to 35,000 estimated hiker days. Parking in 2021 for the primary Mount Elbert route was located a mile farther from the trailhead due to road construction, contributing to a longer climb. Elbert use in 2020 was in the 20,000 to 25,000 days range. Pikes Peak rose to fifth place in 2021 with an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 hiker days. This was down from 15,000 to 20,000 days in 2020.

- more -

The route showing the greatest decline in hiking use statewide was the “Decalibron Loop” that encompasses Mounts Democrat, Lincoln and Bross. The route was closed from May 1 through August 6 due to landowner liability concerns. (Note: The actual summit of Bross remains closed due to private land issues, but hikers are permitted on a bypass loop route near the summit). The route was the fourth most-popular in 2020 (estimated use of 25,000 to 30,000 hiker days) but fell to an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 days last year. Climbers largely complied with the closure, but use levels did not return to 2020 levels even after the August reopening. Estimated use in 2021 on nearby Mount Sherman was cut roughly in half compared to 2020.

Access to Mount Lindsey in the southern Sangre de Cristo Range was also closed due to landowner liability concerns. Use levels did not decline appreciably due to the closure since it came at the end of the season when use levels are normally low.

Smoke from more than 100 western wildfires was a further limit on hiking use in parts of the 2021 14er hiking season. Counters statewide showed a plunge in hiking use the first full weekend in August when air quality reached unhealthy levels. Media reports said that Denver’s air quality for several hours on Saturday, August 7 was the worst of any city in the world.

CFI maintained a network of 23 counter locations in 2021. Counters that had observed data for more than 90 percent of the season included Pikes (100%—Devil’s Playground and Barr Trail), Bierstadt (100%), La Plata (99%) and Quandary (92%). Counters that collected between 60 and 90 percent of the season included: Grays/Torreys (88%), Democrat (87%), Huron (88%), Elbert—three routes (87%), Huron (86%), Princeton (84%), Handies (84%—Grizzly Gulch and American Basin), Redcloud/Sunshine (84%), Castle (76%), Blanca/Ellingwood (74%), Lindsey (73%), Sherman (67%) and Challenger/Kit Carson (61%). The Sneffels and Wilson Peak counters collected data for less than 60 percent of the season. Data from the Shavano counters was deemed suspect and not used.

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 almost \$82.2 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.¹ 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.”

-- more --

CFI's hiking use projections are based on the combination of several data sources. 1) CFI collected hour-by-hour data during the 2021 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 25 and October 11. 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 21,400 individual hikers. Estimates for peaks without trail counters were determined 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 2021.

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 the 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 22 locations during the 2022 summer/fall hiking season after theft of the Bierstadt counter.

CFI uses the term "hiker use 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 "hiker use 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 20,500 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 80 educational videos that have been viewed more than 386,000 times. Learn more at www.14ers.org and obtain frequent updates on Facebook and Instagram.

ⁱ 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.