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COLORADO 14ER HIKING USE DROPS TO 2015 LEVELS (260,000 DAYS) DECALIBRON LOOP CLOSURE CONTRIBUTES TO EQUALING 9-YEAR LOW

(Golden, Colo.) In the nine years since the organization began estimating the number of people hiking Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks, use levels fell to 260,000 in 2023, equaling the all-time low, according to a report released today by the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative (CFI). This was a 6.8 percent decline compared to 2022's estimate and equaled the 260,000 days estimate from the inaugural report covering the 2015 season. Fourteener hiking use peaked during the 2020 pandemic summer at 415,000 hiker days. Closure of the popular Decalibron Loop near Alma due to private landowner liability concerns resulted in a 17,500-day drop (-55%) in the Mosquito Range, the largest decline statewide. The statewide economic impact of hiking Colorado 14ers in 2023 was \$70.5 million based on past 14er hiking use expenditure studies.

"Hiking Colorado's 14ers last year was like stepping into a time machine and coming out in 2015," said Lloyd F. Athearn, executive director of CFI. "After six seasons of increasing use, it has been all downhill since 2020. Closure of the Decalibron loop for half the season was the biggest factor, but use was down last year in three of Colorado's seven ranges containing 14ers, including the popular Front Range closest to the Denver metro area."

In terms of the most popular 14ers, Mount Bierstadt and Quandary Peak again topped the list in 2023 with use on both peaks estimated to be in the 25,000-30,000 hiker days range. Mount Bierstadt's trail counter was stolen for the second year in a row, leaving only six days of collected counter data. Modelling suggested that hiking use on Bierstadt was above 29,000 days, which was a decrease of almost six percent from 2022's estimate. Quandary's trail counter recorded more than 27,000 hiker days during the full season, which was up by 5000 hiker days (23%) compared to 2022. Mount Elbert and Grays and Torreys Peaks were in the second tier of use which had a range of 20,000 to 25,000 hiker days. "Best guess" estimates were 22,000 for Elbert and 21,000 for Grays/Torreys, both of which were increases compared to 2022. The Decalibron Loop (Mounts Democrat, Cameron Lincoln and the Bross bypass), which was in the 20,000-25,000 range in 2022, fell to the 7,000-10,000 days range due to the route being closed by a key landowner through late July. This was an identical decline to the 2021 season when the loop was last closed for a comparable period. Three peaks—Mount Blue Sky and Longs and Pikes Peaks—were in the 10,000-15,000 range, which was unchanged from the prior year.

Last year an estimated 57 percent of statewide hiking use (148,000 hiker days) occurred on the 12 closest 14ers to the metro area (Front Range, Tenmile Range, Mosquito Range and Mount Elbert). The remaining 46 peaks accounted for 112,000 hiker days.

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Compared to the year prior hiking use fell in three mountain ranges: Mosquito Range (-17,500 days, -55%), San Juan Mountains (-5500 days, -14%) and Front Range (-3000 days, -3%). Hiking use in the Sawatch Range was unchanged. Hiking use was up in three ranges: Tenmile Range (+5000 days, 23%). Sangre de Cristo Range (+1500 days, +18%) and the Elk Mountains (+500 days, +7%).

Access to Mount Lindsey in the southern Sangre de Cristo Range was closed to public use the entire season due to landowner liability concerns. People continued to climb the peak, but at lower levels than usual.

CFI maintained a network of 23 counter locations in 2023. Counters that had observed data for more than 90 percent of the season included Quandary (100%), La Plata (100%), Wilson Peak (100%), Elbert (three routes--95%) and Pikes (91%--Devil's Playground, 100%--Barr Trail). Counters that collected between 60 and 90 percent of the season included: Princeton (86%), Grays/Torreys (85%), Huron (84%), Shavano (81%), Sherman (80%), Blanca/Ellingwood (77%), Handies (two routes--73%) and Castle (70%). The trail counter on Bierstadt was stolen after less than a week of data collection, the counter on Democrat failed to launch and the counter on the lower slopes of Mount Bross was not placed by the Colorado Mountain Club.

Colorado was the sixth-fastest-growing state between 2010 and 2020 censuses, growing its population by 14.8 percent. However, growth between April 1, 2020 and July 1, 2023 was a mere 1.8%. Net migration population levels over the past two years is roughly half of the amount seen in prior decades.

CFI's estimate of hiking use suggests a statewide economic impact of \$70.5 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.ⁱ This expenditure estimate has not been updated in more than a decade, so it is likely understated.

CFI's hiking use projections are based on the combination of several data sources. 1) CFI collected hour-by-hour data during the 2023 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 28 and October 7. 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 25,000 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 2023.

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 better location on Mount Princeton, while a new counter was deployed to Mount Bierstadt. Hiking use is being monitored at 23 locations during the 2024 summer/fall hiking season after replacement of the Bierstadt counter and placement of counters on Bross and the Winfield approach to La Plata. The Lindsey and Blanca/Ellingwood counters were not placed in 2024 for staffing reasons.

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 40 sustainably designed, durably built summit trails on 37 14er peaks. CFI has engaged almost 23,000 days of volunteer stewardship since 2001 in the construction and maintenance of these peaks. A multi-pronged educational strategy has contacted more than 210,000 hikers in the field through paid crews and volunteer Peak Stewards, while CFI's YouTube channel contains more than 90 educational videos that have been viewed more than 525,500 times. Learn more at www.14ers.org and obtain frequent updates on Facebook and Instagram.

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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.