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Bitterroot bolting ban puts Spokane climbers on edge, spurs national backlash

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Granite spires line much of Blodgett Canyon in Montana. (Eli Francovich / The Spokesman-Review) [Buy this photo](#)

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“It’s just as local as Leavenworth is for Spokane climbers,” said Kelty Goldby, the president of Spokane’s Bower Climbing Coalition. “It’s heavily used by Spokane climbers.”

The bolting ban was announced earlier this month by Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Matthew Anderson.

Bolts, which are drilled into rock faces, allow climbers to safely ascend. They’re also used as anchors at the top of routes allowing climbers to descend.

This style of climbing is known as sport climbing and differs from traditional climbing in its permanence and impact. In traditional climbing, participants place protective gear that is quickly removed from the rock.

The ban is the latest development in a long-simmering controversy in Montana and reflects tensions created by the sport’s explosive growth worldwide. With roughly 30% of all America’s rock climbing occurring on Forest Service land, it’s a decision that could have wide-reaching impacts.

For about the last decade, much of Montana’s climbing strife has centered on the [Mill Canyon area](#), which has the highest concentration of bolted, moderate climbing routes in the state and is a popular area for climbers making the transition from indoor climbing to outdoors. The area where most of those routes are located – the alluringly named Tick Wall – is also a recommended wilderness area.

The popularity of the area and permanent nature of bolts has drawn the ire of wilderness advocates.

Some locals, including the Friends of the Bitterroot group, have lobbied the forest service to manage the creation of new climbing routes more strictly following complaints.

The service, for its part, [has framed the decision as a timeout](#), not a permanent change.

The ban is intended to last only until a climbing management plan can be developed, said Steve Brown, the district ranger for the Stevensville area, which encompasses most of the rock climbing in Montana. The management plan process hasn’t started, but Brown hopes it will be complete within a year.

“It’s not a climbing ban. You’re welcome to come to the Bitterroots,” he said. “I hope you come to the Bitterroots.”

When Brown became the district ranger in November, it became clear Mill Creek was “a losing issue” with too much “bad blood” on both sides of the debate, he said.

Instead of focusing specifically on that area, as past rangers and forest supervisors had, he decided to “talk about climbing management across the forest as a whole.” As climbing grows in popularity, he said, it’s paramount that the forest service be involved in any future route development.

“The idea, from a land management standpoint, is that if there is going to be development of an area that invites repeated use as a land manager we need to be part of the decision,” he said.

While climbers and advocates in Montana support a management plan in principal, last week’s order was hasty, sloppily written and ignored past agreements, they say.

“This is a discussion about how we ought to use our public lands, not a user-group conflict,” said Damian Mast, a



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users. He said the Mill Creek issues that existed were resolved when the previous forest supervisor, Julie King, suspended new bolting in the Tick Wall of Mill Creek but allowed bolting elsewhere.

The ban drew attention from the Access Fund, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Colorado. It issued an action alert to their more than 20,000 members earlier this week calling the Bitterroot order a “national-level threat.”

“Frankly, the language in the policy is not only vague, but confusing,” said Erik Murdock, the policy director for the Access Fund.

In particular, Murdock said the order as written doesn’t indicate that it’s temporary, doesn’t specify that it’s only banning bolts (as opposed to other types of climbing anchors, like woven slings) and has no provision for replacing aged or damaged bolts.

“There are a lot of flaws in this order,” he said. “I don’t think that was the intention of the forest service. They just didn’t do their due diligence.”

Because the forest service has no national guidelines around rock climbing, Murdock and others worry the Bitterroot decision will be used as precedent in other forests.

Since they sent out the call to action on Tuesday, Murdock said more than 5,000 people have sent letters to the service. On Monday, Murdock said the Access Fund will deliver the service a list of recommended revisions.

“I think the reason why so many people engaged was because the process was so skewed,” he said. “They want a democratic decision-making process.”

Spokane climbers signaled their displeasure with the ban on social media and echoed concerns that climbing access in Washington and Idaho could be limited in the future.

“It definitely raises the concern that it could happen in other places,” Goldby said. “It would be really disappointing to see that happen in the Selkirks.”

In Montana, the bolting ban has been praised by some concerned about overuse and ecological damage.

“Friends of the Bitterroot believes strongly that the recent prohibition on bolting and new routes is a critically needed timeout while all stakeholders work to develop a climbing management plan that fits the needs and protects the special resources we have on the Bitterroot,” said Van P. Keele, a longtime board member of Friends of the Bitterroot in an email.

The Bitterroot Audubon Society also supports the ban, citing habitat degradation concerns.

“Birds are already facing many challenges in light of climate crisis and loss of habitat, so we want to make sure concerns for them and other wildlife are considered as a plan is crafted,” said Micki Long, the conservation chair for the Bitterroot Audubon Society.

Following the blowback to the decision, Stevensville ranger Brown said he will revise the order to allow for the replacement of existing bolts for safety reasons. Otherwise, it will stand as is, he said.



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