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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Subject: Appeal to USFS Against Prohibiting Fixed Anchors in Wilderness Areas

Dear U.S. Forest Service,

I am writing to express my grave concerns regarding the proposed policy to prohibit fixed anchors in America's Wilderness areas. This policy, if enacted, would not only reverse nearly 60 years of established climbing precedent but also significantly endanger the safety of climbers and threaten to erase a crucial part of our nation's climbing heritage.

Fixed anchors such as bolts, pitons, and slings are fundamental to the safety of climbers. Their classification as "prohibited installations" under the Wilderness Act overlooks their essential role. Climbers rely on these anchors for safe passage in challenging terrain. The historical policy, which has permitted the careful use of fixed anchors for over half a century, demonstrates that it is possible to maintain the natural character of Wilderness areas while supporting safe and responsible climbing activities.

The timing of these proposed changes is especially concerning, given the concurrent legislative efforts aimed at protecting and maintaining safe access to Wilderness climbing. The Protecting America's Rock Climbing Act and America's Outdoor Recreation Act, both moving through Congress with strong bipartisan support, are focused on establishing guidelines for the legal use, placement, and maintenance of fixed anchors. These legislative efforts recognize the importance of balancing environmental stewardship with the needs of the climbing community. The proposed USFS policy seems to be in direct conflict with this legislative direction.

The prohibition on fixed anchors raises significant safety concerns. The maintenance of these anchors is a critical aspect of ensuring climber safety. This responsibility, traditionally undertaken by the climbing community, is vital for the upkeep of safe and reliable climbing routes. The proposed policy will hinder these maintenance efforts, potentially leading to unsafe climbing conditions and increased risk of accidents.

Moreover, the ability to explore Wilderness areas is a fundamental aspect of climbing, often requiring immediate decision-making in complex and challenging environments. Restricting the use of fixed anchors will severely limit climbers' ability to navigate these terrains safely, thereby diminishing access to these pristine natural areas.

The policy also poses a threat to America's rich climbing legacy. Iconic climbing routes in areas such as Yosemite, Rocky Mountain National Park, and Joshua Tree are part of our national heritage. Erasing these routes would mean losing a significant portion of our history and achievements in the climbing world.

Specifically for the USFS, the restriction on establishing new routes in non-Wilderness lands as "existing climbing opportunities" is problematic. This approach is likely to be unenforceable and will create confusion among both land managers and climbers. The management policy for non-Wilderness climbing should continue to allow for the establishment of new anchors, barring specific findings that necessitate restrictions to protect cultural and natural resources.

In conclusion, I urge the USFS to reconsider this policy proposal. I recommend engaging with the climbing community and other stakeholders to develop guidelines that respect both the preservation of Wilderness areas and the needs of climbers. By working together, we can ensure the safety of climbers and the preservation of America's climbing legacy.

Sincerely,
Austin South