

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/30/2024 6:43:39 PM

First name: Philip

Last name: England

Organization: CRAG-VT

Title: Treasurer

Comments: First and foremost, I think it should be acknowledged that the US Forest Service, policymakers, outdoor recreation advocates, climbers, and the vast majority of the people involved in this conversation have a lot of shared interests and goals. We all love this land and want to be able to spend time in it, which means balancing access, stewardship, sustainable practices of land management, recreational activities, and protection of this environment. The balance, I believe, is the topic at hand, and I appreciate the ability to provide my thoughts on the matter.

Climbers represent some of the strongest advocates for the protection and stewardship of the wild parts of our country. We are called to these spaces. We find joy, fulfillment, and meaning in the time we spend in the vertical world. Lands managed by our US Forest Service are the most magnificent natural wonders that exist in our country, with a long tradition of explorers and adventurers finding achievement and purpose there. This legacy must be considered in the management policies of these areas, as our collaboration can support all the competing interests of the stakeholders mentioned previously.

The simple fact is that fixed anchors represent the most critical single component of outdoor climbing. Safe, reliable anchors mean that climbers ascending or descending have a trustworthy, lifesaving tool to navigate the climbs that have been established for decades, as well as the new places that are yet to be explored. So long as people are climbing in US Forest Service wilderness areas, there is no more important strategy, tool, or system than fixed anchors to avoid accidents, injuries, and deaths. The data around climbing related accidents overwhelmingly supports this sentiment, most accidents occur during rappelling, and this activity relies entirely on anchors to be well maintained, located in the most naturally accessible place for ascending and descending, and within rope length of the previous or next anchors. Without these anchors, climbers must rely on living trees and plants, rock of often unknown quality or security, or ad hoc methods of moving up and down safely, and the results are sometimes fatal.

Fixed anchors are not currently prohibited installations, and should not be considered as such. They've existed for more than half a century. They are extremely low impact, unobtrusive, and easy to maintain. The best partners in understanding where and how and where to install and maintain fixed anchors are the local climbing organizations such as CRAG-VT who exist entirely for the purpose of ensuring safe, sustainable climbing access in our region. This collaborative effort with the local partners is essential to the effectiveness of the fixed anchors that already exist, and will exist in the future in these areas.

It is unreasonable to create new policies which prohibit fixed anchors on US Forest Service lands when they have existed for decades and have saved countless lives. These anchors also need to be replaced and updated as the land erodes and the technology improves. Modern climbing anchors are even safer, longer lasting, and less disruptive to the landscape than ever before.

Venturing into the unknown in these wilderness areas is one of the greatest opportunities they provide. A prohibition on installing new fixed anchors will prevent this exploration from happening at all in many cases, and certainly will prevent future climbers from accessing this newly explored territory. It is critical to establish these basic safety tools during this process.

Restricting the establishment of new climbing routes on non-wilderness lands is both unenforceable and unreasonable. Non-wilderness climbing management policy should maintain opportunities for new anchors unless a thorough analysis determines that climbing should be restricted to protect cultural and natural resources.

It is reasonable to have a process around installing and maintaining fixed anchors on these lands. Climbers and climbing advocates should have some accountability in the places we choose to explore, and it is fair to have limits in what should be made accessible for the future. Banning fixed anchors is not the way to achieve this, and I strongly urge you to consider this comment and all of the others in your policy making decisions.

Thank you from Vermont!