

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/31/2024 3:20:07 AM

First name: Nate

Last name: Liles

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear United States Forest Service,

I am writing to comment on your proposed Forest Service Manual 2300 - Recreation, Wilderness, and Related Resource Management, and Chapter 2350 - Trail, River, and Similar Recreation Opportunities direction.

I am a rock climber that will be directly negatively adversely affected by these regulations should they become final - I will explain the details below.

According to "A Guide to the Rulemaking Process" prepared by the Office of the Federal Register - For an individual to push the USFS to manage differently I must articulate how I will be negatively adversely affected and make a negative, substantive comment regarding whether a rule is:

1. Constitutional.
2. Goes beyond the agency's legal authority.
3. Made without following the notice-and-comment process required by the ADA or other law.
4. Arbitrary.
5. Capricious.
6. Abuse of agency discretion.
7. An agency head can also be sued for failing to act in a timely manner in certain cases.

Arbitrary is defined as "something that is determined by judgment or whim and not for any specific reason or rule. Capricious is defined as a judicial decision which is not based on any apparent reason. Absence of a rational connection between the facts found and the choice made."

Direct adverse effect - As the Forest Service provided no data or information on climbing, I need to. There are three primary types of rock climbing on Forest Service lands - traditional (trad), sport, and aid. Both sport and aid are fixed anchor-based sports. Even trad climbers - less than 5% of all climbers, maybe even less than 1% - don't exclusively climb trad - they use fixed anchors at belays, or for rappelling off the top of their trad climb. Hence the regulations proposed by the Forest Service will have a direct, negative effect on all climbers in the United States. Even those not climbing on Forest Service lands will be directly affected - as the Forest Service restrictions both in and out of Wilderness, combined with the simultaneous restrictions and closures being implemented by the Park Service will likely reduce the national climbing opportunity in half - and displace those climbers to BLM and municipal climbing areas which will become immediately overcrowded with likely significant resource impacts.

Complete lack of information - One of overarching concerns about this proposed direction is that the Forest Service has not demonstrated it knows anything about the climbing or the climbers who visit Forest Service lands. Based on this lack of data, it is safe to assume the Forest Service is ignorant with respect to basic statistics of climbing it would need to make an informed decision including:

- \* Number of climbers annually nationally, by state, by known climbing area.
- \* Number of routes located on Forest Service lands nationally, by state, by climbing area.
- \* Number of fixed anchors located on Forest Service lands nationally, by state, by climbing area.

This lack of basic information about the activity the agency wants to manage and the associated hardware the agency wants to restrict/prohibit is inherently arbitrary and capricious.

Remedy - The agency should pull back these draft Manuals to take the time to educate itself about the climbing activity and climbers' expectations and preferences so it can make informed decisions.

2355.32 - Placement, Replacement, and Retention of Fixed Anchors and Fixed Equipment in Congressionally

## Designated Wilderness

2. Determine whether placement or replacement of fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness is the minimum necessary for administration of the area for Wilderness Act purposes by conducting a Minimum Requirements Analysis.

The Forest Service failed to provide any statistics concerning the number of MRAs they have completed by Wilderness in the last 5 years - that is unfortunate because it likely would have shown a majority only completed a handful in that timeframe. The Forest Service also failed to provide how much the resource specialists - the wildlife biologist, the soil scientist, the forester....cost to complete their analyses - maybe \$25,000 per proposal? For an under-funded agency like the Forest Service, this policy will effectively end any possibility to increase opportunities for primitive or unconfined climbing recreation because the funding to complete MRAs isn't there today, and it isn't likely it will be there tomorrow, hence this policy should be modified.

5. Existing fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness may be retained pending completion of a Minimum Requirements Analysis, as funding and resources allow, that determines they are the minimum necessary to facilitate primitive or unconfined recreation or otherwise preserve wilderness character. In the interim, emergency replacements of individual fixed anchors posing a legitimate safety concern may occur unless prescribed otherwise through an approved climbing management plan or equivalent planning document.

When the Forest Service states ...may be retained... it is stating the default is to remove all existing fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness which is arbitrary and capricious. While the Forest Service failed to provide any information about the number of fixed anchors in Forest Service Wilderness and when they were installed - it is a safe assumption that fixed anchors were already in place at the time of designation. If that is accurate - that the fixed anchors were already in place at the of designation - and the area was designated - fixed anchors and all - then how can the agency justify declaring the default is to remove all fixed anchors in Wilderness? - the agency cannot justify this action - it is arbitrary and capricious. The remedy for this situation is to grandfather in (allow existing) existing fixed anchors. The Forest Service has already set the precedent for pre-existing uses in Wilderness including airstrips, dams, mining, roads, competitive events....

### 2355.31 - Placement, Replacement, and Retention of Fixed Anchors and Fixed Equipment Outside Wilderness

3. Restrict the placement and replacement of fixed anchors and fixed equipment to established climbing opportunities and to approved new climbing opportunities that have been evaluated for natural and cultural resource impacts.

In a single sentence, the Forest Service is proposing to upend nearly 100 years of precedent - from allowing fixed anchors virtually anywhere - to a complete prohibition - without any data, justification, or rationale - another instance of an arbitrary and capricious action.

### 2355.21 - Climbing Management Plan

1. Include management objectives, the area's desired Recreation Opportunity Spectrum settings (FSM 2310), and scenic character and scenic integrity objectives for climbing opportunities, including any associated facilities. Reduce visual impacts of climbing equipment to the extent possible.

In some situations, focusing on reducing the visual impacts of climbing is appropriate, in other places it is not. Where non-climbers often visit or pass through climbing areas, most frequently because there is a trail running at the base of a rock face with climbing - it is appropriate to require the hanger and the head of the bolt be painted the color of the rock. However, for a majority of climbing crags - the rock faces where climbers climb - are located where no other visitor goes - so the shiny hangers and bolt heads have no effect because there are no non-climbers to see them. Furthermore - for climbers there is overwhelming value for those hangers and bolts to shine brightly - as they literally dictate the path up the wall the climber needs to take - they are a trail, a beacon, a lifeline. The current Forest Service direction to blindly reduce visual impacts everywhere without consideration of safety and the climber's recreational opportunity is arbitrary and capricious.

Remedy - The existing text should be modified to recognize the multiple perceptions of shiny fixed hardware and

the need for that hardware to be managed differently in different settings.

Provide climbing opportunities that emphasize the natural setting of NFS lands

Natural setting - today climbing already occurs across a spectrum of Forest Service managed lands. Specifically, the Forest Service uses the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) in its planning of recreation opportunities - this should be used in this situation - the setting of the climbing should be consistent with the ROS of the area the climbing area is located within. For example, if the climbing area is located in an urban setting (developed campground), then the climbing area will also be located in an urban setting. This situation exists in Big Cottonwood and America Fork Canyons in Utah.

Develop a climbing management plan covering each administrative unit or ranger district that has one or more climbing opportunities, as required and as funding and resources allow (FSM 2355.21).

As the Forest Service has only completed 2 climbing plans in all of recorded history (Rumney Rocks, NH and South Platte Ranger District, CO) - this requirement is unreasonable, arbitrary, and capricious. This text should begin "Consider developing a climbing management plan..." This direction should be made optional, not mandatory, for the hundreds of Ranger Districts across the country. This monumental amount of work will reasonably take decades for each Forest and Ranger District to implement.

with the highest level of need (such as high levels of use, use conflicts, or resource degradation).

This direction pushes the USFS to be reactive, and cannot act in a proactive approach under this text. For example, if the USFS believes an undeveloped area will soon be developed - the agency could not act proactively to develop policies and plans for this undeveloped area under the current direction. This direction should be altered - to allow the District Ranger to prioritize climbing management when, where and how the authorized officer decides. The existing direction is undermining the authority of the authorized officer.

Climbing or climbing-related activity in wilderness must be restricted or prohibited when its occurrence, continuation, or expansion would adversely impact wilderness character.

The USFS has failed to define what is an adverse impact to wilderness character regarding climbing. To keep this text, the USFS must define what an adverse impact would or could be. In addition - the requirement to significantly restrict or even prohibit climbing because of a potentially minor impact to wilderness character is inappropriate and capricious toward climbers, and is a non-inclusive approach (part of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)).

Restrict or prohibit the placement or replacement of fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness unless specifically authorized based on a case-specific determination that they are the minimum necessary for administration of the area for Wilderness Act purposes (FSM 2355.32).

The restriction or prohibition of replacement of existing fixed anchors - in particular replacement of failing or failed anchors - is essential to maintain climber safety. Consider the situation where a permanent anchor is about to fail - and that failure is well known in the climbing community (for example, posted on Mountain Project.com). In this situation - if the anchor failed - the climber's death would likely generate a multi-million dollar lawsuit that the Forest Service will lose. This prohibition of replacement of existing fixed anchors will also result in negative impacts to natural resources. In particular, in the situation where the fixed anchor is known to have failed or might fail soon, climbers will be forced to use pitons, slings, and other more resource-impacting anchors (e.g. trees/vegetation) rather than the existing fixed anchors. In addition, the prohibition to replace existing failing fixed anchors will reasonably lead to a significant to complete loss of historical climbing opportunity. For example, if a critical fixed anchor cannot be used and climbers can no longer climb a route established years or decades before - the historical cultural identity of the route and area would be lost.

Additional Points:

Aging hardware makes climbing routes and descents less safe, which causes more accidents. Maintenance of

existing anchors is very important to the safety of climbers and is labor intensive to perform. The proposed directives will make existing routes more hazardous by restricting maintenance of bolts and anchors.

Bolts and fixed rappel stations prevent resource degradation in delicate alpine environments. These types of planned descent routes not only avoid vegetation damage (rappelling from trees, scrambling through fragile sections of alpine plants, etc.) but also create descent options that reduce rockfall hazards, minimize chances of climbers getting ropes stuck on descents, and avoid dangerous situations and costly rescue operations. Bolted anchors tend to reduce trampling and social trail creation in delicate alpine environments by directing all climbers to a single location on durable rock surfaces instead of wandering around to assess descent options.

Rappelling is frequently the primary cause of death in climbing accidents. When climbers rappel, they rely completely on an anchor, and anchor failure during rappelling often results in death. Prohibiting the maintenance of anchors or any placement of bolted anchors increases use of unreliable natural features that greatly increase the risk of anchor failure and impacts on vegetation.

On wilderness routes, bolts are already placed sparingly. In situations where no removable gear can be placed, bolts are placed to prevent catastrophic falls. Rappelling from some type of fixed anchors is often the only option for climbers to safely retreat from routes without SAR rescue, for example during inclement weather. Prohibiting these placements will lead to potential for more catastrophic falls in the wilderness and more SAR calls. Furthermore, SAR teams rely on fixed anchors to perform rescue operations. Not permitting fixed anchors will jeopardize SAR rescue operations and unnecessarily endanger the lives of rescuers.

Climbers have been responsibly recreating in the wilderness since before the passage of the Wilderness Act. The current fixed anchor policy requires the use of hand-drilling to install fixed anchors, which already significantly limits the quantity of fixed hardware (generally mechanical bolts) that can be installed. Fixed hardware is installed either to protect unprotectable faces and sections between crack systems or to enable safe rappel descent.

Many summits, towers, and walls require rappel descent. Camouflaged, bolted anchors with stainless steel bolts are the safest, most durable, and lowest-impact rappel anchors. The alternatives to bolted anchors are leaving slings or cords on vegetation, which is both unsightly and can damage sensitive vegetation over time, or slinging existing features such as flakes, chockstones, or other natural constrictions. These alternatives are much more visible as slings and cord are larger and have a greater visual profile, much less durable as they are susceptible to UV damage, and greatly increase the risk of accidents occurring when damaged cord is used that cannot be properly inspected.

Wilderness routes are typically approached in a ground-up style, which involves considerable adventure and self-reliance. The ground-up ethos aligns with maintaining a primitive and unconfined recreation quality of the wilderness. Imposing restrictions on the kind of hardware that can be left when establishing a new route, by definition, confines and restricts the recreation quality of the wilderness and can create very dangerous situations for climbers attempting to climb new routes.

Climbing routes that follow continuous crack systems from start to finish and have walk-off descents that don't require rappelling are rare. Requiring permits for fixed hardware will essentially limit new routes to those that follow continuous crack systems to enable only the use of removable protection and don't require rappel descents. Again, there is no way to know if a bolt is required to protect a section of climbing until a route is climbed.

Climbers have a vested interest in preserving the primitive, unconfined, and solitary nature of the wilderness. We enjoy and explore these wild places and always try to minimize our impact. Our local and national stewardship organizations are continually educating climbers on how to reduce impact and protect wilderness climbing areas.

Climbers have a small impact in wilderness areas compared to recreational users and hikers, who are present in larger numbers and are generally less educated and more likely to leave trash, go off trail, or otherwise fail to practice Leave-No-Trace principles.

Fixed anchors are an essential piece of climbers' safety system and are not prohibited "installations" under the Wilderness Act - they are "substantially unnoticeable" to use the terminology of the Wilderness Act. Following existing, long-standing climbing policies that allow judicious use of fixed anchors for more than a half-century will do more to protect Wilderness character while providing for primitive and unconfined Wilderness climbing.

The language of the Wilderness Act of 1964 provides a de minimis exception to sparingly-placed fixed anchors. The Act states that a wilderness area "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." Camouflaged fixed anchors have a substantially unnoticeable impact on wilderness areas. They are not visible from ground-level and are generally invisible until they are encountered while climbing a route. They have no significant effect on the wilderness character, and prevent further impact by keeping climbers on specific descent rappel routes on solid rock. Ascent and descent routes with anchors are similar to established trails in wilderness areas that prevent impact like erosion and de-vegetation to surrounding areas.

Placing undue and unreasonable restrictions on climbing will not protect wilderness areas but will severely strain a largely beneficial and cooperative relationship between the climbing community and land management agencies. This will benefit neither climbers nor the Forest Service.