Colorado Fourteeners Initiative’s “14er Report Card” shows trails need $24 million in repairs

By Jason Blevins
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Rachael Hudson and Chris Houde, trail crew members for the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, clear a trail off Flat Creek in the Mount of the Holy Cross Wilderness Area. Photo by Jason Blevins

Colorado’s fourteeners are ill. And the bill for trail reconstruction and restoration on the state’s beloved peaks could be more than $24 million.

That’s according to the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, which this week released its first-ever “14er Report Card,” a three-year inventory and analysis of trails that wind to the summit of 39 of Colorado’s 54 14,000-foot peaks.

The report card shows the state’s fourteener in dire health, with 26 trails built in the last 20 years needing $6 million in improvements and 16 user-created trails needing $18 million for new trail construction.

Lloyd Ahearn, executive director of the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, said his three-year report card is “a sobering reality check” on his group’s goal of a sustainable, durable trail to the summit of every fourteener.

When the nonprofit Colorado Fourteener Initiative formed in 1994, there were two purpose-built, established trails up fourteeners, the Keyhole Route up Longs...
Peak and the Barr Trail up Pikes Peak. Every other fourteener summit trail was simply trampled tundra connecting trailhead to peak. Through what Athearn called his group’s “glacial like progress,” the CFI and other partner groups have worked with the Forest Service to design sustainable 26 trails up 30 peaks.

Those trails need $6 million in work, according to the CFI report, which analyzed 10 different factors including erosion and train widening and the amount of natural rock available to make needed repairs. That repair cost includes more than $2 million to fix the trail up Mt. Bierstadt from Guanella Pass, which was rebuilt from 1999 to 2002 and again in 2014. Bierstadt got an “F” on the report card, largely due to its popularity, ease of access, ease of climb and the absence of natural rock to build the trail.

Another 16 fourteener trails built by Vibram-soled users over decades – which were built without longevity in mind – need $18 million in repairs, including eight “F”-graded peaks that need $8.5 million to $15 million in repairs.

CFI is still studying 16 peaks that were not included in the report card.

The problems with the trails is not over-use as much as the location of the user-built trails, Athearn said, hence the hefty cost for redesigning and relocating those 16 unplanned summit trails. The five Front Range fourteeners – Mt. Bierstadt, Mt. Evans, Grays Peak, Torrey’s Peak and Quandary Peak – see about 100,000 annual hiker days and need an estimated $6.3 million in trail repair, according to the report card.

The CFI is not advocating for permits to limit use or installing user fees to fund repairs. The group has honed a different model over its two decades, raising private money and enlistng the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps and volunteers to support its work on Colorado’s highest peaks. Each year for the past six years the group has set a record for fundraising. The group now raises $10 for every $1 provided by the Forest Service to design and rebuild trails, Athearn said.

“It seems like ewe have an opportunity here to harness philanthropy and volunteerism and try a different way that does not involve limiting use (through permits) or going into that regulatory direction with fees,” he said. “We are continuing to grow the potential of foundations, the Youth Corps and local governments that are working to keep us from going into that regulatory model.”

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