

Business Plan

Penitente Canyon Campground

BLM Saguache Field Office
San Luis Valley Public Lands Center
Saguache, Colorado
Congressional District 3

Fee Site Description

Penitente Canyon is part of the 7,529 acre Penitente Canyon Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), primarily managed as a destination for sport rock climbers by the Saguache Field Office (FO) of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), located in the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado. The area is geologically unique (the result of history's largest recorded volcanic eruption (La Garita Caldera)), with large boulders and canyons that make it an extremely popular (and world-renowned) rock climbing area well known for its difficult climbs (most climbs are 5.10 or higher). Besides a free day-use rock climbing area, there is also a network of single track trails in the SRMA, as well as an overnight campground. The canyon is culturally rich with Native American and Spanish history, as well as the must-see Spanish religious pictograph of the Virgin of Guadalupe depicted high on a canyon wall, and history of the Brothers Penitente religious sect (Los Hermanos Penitentes). Additionally, a branch of the Old Spanish Trail winds through the SRMA with ruts from the ox-carts carved into the very stone. Besides cultural and geologic history, the area is also blessed with a unique natural history, being home to one of Colorado's rarest plants, the rock-loving neo-parrya that lives on cliff walls. A small system of 4-wheel drive roads provides access to other rock-climbing areas and a system of single-track trails (several of which emanate from the campground itself) is used mainly by mountain bikers, hikers and horseback riders. Other recreational opportunities include; watchable wildlife and photography.

Site Facilities

Facilities at Penitente Canyon campground consist of 18 walk-in tent sites, 5 drive-in tent or camper sites, 2 group sites, 3 vault toilets, trash receptacles, and a water system. Two information kiosks and a fee station provide visitors an opportunity to view interpretive panels, learn the rules and regulations that apply to the area and pay for their campsites. The rock-climbing area has numerous bolted routes for climbers to use, as well as a large group picnic gazebo at the head of the day use area near the parking area. A system of multiple use trails and 4WD roads also wind their way throughout the SRMA. The contact person in the Saguache Field Office (SAFO) is Sean Noonan at (719) 655-6136.

Visitor Demographics (Description of Customers Who Use the Campground)

Information gathered from a 2007 GPRA survey, visitor contacts by agency personnel, and descriptions by campers on Recreation Use Permits (RUP) all indicate that most

overnight campers are almost exclusively from outside of the San Luis Valley, with most from the Front Range of Colorado (especially Denver, Boulder and Colorado Springs). Overnight campers are almost solely rock climbers from outside the commuting area. On average, only about 4 camping parties per year register San Luis Valley addresses on their RUP's.

Recreation Use

Despite its increasing popularity among visitors, Penitente Canyon is still characterized by its sense of solitude and spirituality. Based on data collected in 2010, of the over 40,000 annual visitors to the recreation area, 21,000 of them came specifically to Penitente Canyon, with approximately 1,851 visitors staying in the campground one or more nights, with 3 parties utilizing the Golden Access discount pass and 30 parties utilizing the Golden Age or America the Beautiful Senior discount passes. Increased visitation to Penitente Canyon is a trend that is expected to continue due to increasing participation in the sport of rock climbing, the promotion of Penitente Canyon as a heritage tourism destination by the Colorado Tourism Office (Penitente Canyon was also the subject of a Channel 4 Colorado Getaways segment in June 2010), and increasing population projections for the country as a whole, the West, and especially Colorado in the years ahead. Likewise, increased use of age-related (Golden Age or ATB Senior) passes is expected as baby-boomers continue to reach eligibility requirements.

Financial Analysis (Costs and Revenues)

Revenues: Current annual revenues generated at Penitente Canyon Campground have averaged around \$3,700 in recent years. Projected annual revenue (based on approval of the proposed fee increase) is expected to be around \$6,800

Operations & Maintenance: Fee expenditures for O&M in recent years have averaged around \$3,375 per year - \$1,375 for CG Maintenance worker salary, \$500 for supplies (including water system compliance and testing expenses), and \$1,500 for toilet pumping. Projected expenses (based on approval of the proposed fee increase) are expected to be similar for FY 11, with the addition of \$1,000 for deferred sign maintenance.

Appropriated funds and grants have also been utilized in recent years at Penitente Canyon CG. As part of its Service First relationship with the Rio Grande National Forest, maintenance at Penitente Canyon (BLM's only developed campground in the San Luis Valley) has been performed by the Saguache Ranger District campground maintenance worker to increase efficiency, and whose partial salary and vehicle expense count toward the overall cost of maintenance at Penitente Canyon. BLM appropriated funds are also used to offset Law Enforcement expenses, fund a seasonal Interpretive Specialist who is working on products for Penitente Canyon SRMA, and a 2010 Take It Outside grant funded some deferred maintenance at the campground and is expected to do the same in 2011 if the grant is awarded again.

Fair Market Value Assessment

Over 30 public lands-style developed campgrounds and one private campground/RV park from throughout the San Luis Valley (and within 50 miles of the Valley) were compared in order to develop an appropriate and sustainable fee structure suitable for the foreseeable future.

Price range:

- Rio Grande National Forest: \$5-\$16 for individual sites and \$26-\$32 for group sites (similar to other National Forest and Field Office campgrounds in surrounding areas and based on varying services and amenities).
- Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve: \$14 for individual sites and \$65-\$80 for group sites, plus park entrance fees (similar to other National Park system campgrounds in surrounding areas).
- San Luis Lake State Park: \$20/night for all campsites.
- Fun Valley RV Camping: \$24.50/night for 2 people. (Private CG's in the San Luis Valley are typically RV campgrounds with full hook-ups).

Selected fee and method: Increase from \$5 to \$11/night per individual site and \$15 to \$20/night per group site.

Rationale for Fee Changes

In order to continue providing existing visitor services and amenities, while also improving or enhancing customer desired public health and safety, increased accessibility, natural and cultural resource protection, improved facilities and better information, education and interpretation of Penitente Canyon campground and SRMA, a change in fee structure is necessary.

The current fees of \$5 per individual campsite and \$15 per group site were established when the campground was built in 1997 under the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) authority, transitioned to the Recreation Fee Demonstration authority in 2002, and transitioned again to the current Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) authority in 2006. No changes to the current fee structure have been made since they were established in 1997 to account for increasing inflation or rising costs to perform routine, annual and deferred maintenance, such as; water testing and compliance, other public health and safety compliance, toilet pumping, trash collection, cost of living increases for seasonal employees, equipment operating expenses, law enforcement presence, etc. Increasing overnight camping fees will help BLM to account for rising expenses that have compounded over the last 13 years, align rates with similar facilities (especially on the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center), and provide improved, enhanced and additional services that the public desires based on ample visitor feedback.

Objectives for Use of Fee Receipts

Additional fees would help BLM to improve visitor services by:

- Increasing safety and law enforcement patrols (more on-site agency presence from Recreation and Law Enforcement personnel and volunteers/camp host).

- Improving sanitation (ex. add 2 CXT Toilets and Bear-Saver Trash Cans).
- Increasing Accessibility and reduced barriers (ex. rehabilitating campsites and replacing old amenities with Accessible ones).
- Improving protection of cultural artifacts (ex. signing, interpretation and physical protection methods).
- Improving natural resource protection (ex. mitigating erosion throughout campground, protecting sensitive plant, reduction of noxious weeds).
- Improving routine and annual maintenance (ex. expand capacity to maintain the campground-personnel, equipment and supplies).
- Reducing deferred maintenance (ex. buildings, campsites, amenities, signs, trails).
- Expanding Interpretation program (ex. Native American, Old Spanish Trail, Los Hermanos Penitentes, pioneer, Fish Creek tuff and geology, rock-loving neo-parryii).
- Enhancing setting for recreation experiences and beneficial outcomes (ex. based on customer feedback and suggestions from our Landscape Architect).

Social/Economic Impacts

San Luis Valley residents utilize Penitente Canyon for a variety of reasons, such as: cultural affiliation (Virgin of Guadalupe pictograph), picnicking, choke-cherry picking and hiking. With the exception of local Adams State College students and a small number of local residents, participation in rock climbing (the principal attraction and recreational activity in the SRMA) is almost completely performed by people from outside the commuting area, and who represent nearly all overnight campers as well. Local area residents, by and large, do not utilize the campground and typically pay no fees. On average, only about 4 camping parties per year register San Luis Valley addresses on their RUP's. All other campers are tourists from outside the economically challenged San Luis Valley, who have budgeted for extended stays away from home. For these visitors, the proposed fee increase for an average 2-night stay in Penitente Canyon CG would be \$12 for an individual site and \$10 for a group site.

Impacts related to social or economic factors as a result of this proposal are arguably minimal.

Visitor Feedback Mechanisms

Visitors are able to provide feedback about Penitente Canyon through Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) surveys (Penitente Canyon's 2007 survey resulted in a 91% overall visitor satisfaction rating for appropriate facilities, services and recreational opportunities), focus groups conducted to determine desired setting, experiences and beneficial outcomes achieved by recreation participants, feedback from permitted groups and commercial outfitters and guides during on-site inspections and performance evaluations, comments provided to agency employees (including Law Enforcement) during visitor contacts, the use of onsite comment cards and comments received by Visitor Information Specialists working in the various unit offices of the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. Plans are currently in the works to improve the local BLM website to better receive visitor feedback as well.

There is consistency among the various feedback mechanisms that indicate visitors to the campground are very happy with the natural setting in general, though strongly favor those areas or campsites that allow greater access to vehicles (climbers carry a lot of expensive gear and want it close to them at all times – related to that, they also appreciate agency presence in the campground and day-use area), avoid areas overrun with weeds, do not like the various types of mostly non-bear proof trash containers, do not camp in designated tent pads that don't fit modern tents, understand the need for additional toilets, utilize social trails that are not designed, and universally request more interpretation and better signing of this culturally and naturally rich area.

Public Participation

Campground visitor contacts have been documented since June, 2009. To date, all fee-paying visitors to the campground that provided comments about the proposed fee increase have expressed understanding and the need for a fee increase in order to continue to provide existing services, to address the deferred maintenance backlog, as well as to expand and enhance customer desired visitor services, such as new interpretation.

A news release was submitted to local area papers, Congressional staffs, Saguache and Alamosa County Commissioners, and internally to San Luis Valley Public Lands Center employees on or before September 21, 2010. The same information was posted at information kiosks at the campground along with customer comment cards. The complete proposal will also be posted to the BLM website on or about October 1, 2010.

Combined with the 5 documented campground visitor contacts, only one other comment has been received at this time, which appeared to be the result of a frustration with out of state campground hosts (presumably in concessionaire campgrounds), which exist at some locations on the neighboring Rio Grande National Forest.