

Four Park County 14ers still closed over liability, safety issues

By Pamela Lawson

07/06/2007

From hightimbertimes.com

A great summer pleasure in Colorado, for residents and visitors alike, is to summit the state's "14ers" — 54 mountains that rise more than 14,000 feet above sea level.

Some people like to climb them all, assuming they all are on public lands.

But four of them, along the Mosquito Range in Park County, require passage across private lands.

Those property owners must grant permission before access is possible, and they are still addressing issues of liability and public safety, despite legislation passed last year designed to eliminate their concerns.

Those 14ers include Mount Bross, Cameron, Democrat and Lincoln.

"They did pass the bill, but right near the end it was changed so that the liability law only covers people if they stay on the designated trail," said Cara Doyle, executive director of the Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative. "If you hike up here, (you know) it's not always easy to see where a trail is."

The Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative, an organization interested in the welfare of the mountain range, hopes to overcome the legal and physical barriers. The organization has helped unite many diverse groups to that end.

It hopes to resolve the concerns of property owners, address the dangers to climbers — regarding old mines near the peaks — and take steps to protect rare plant life along the trail.

Gold, silver and other minerals have been discovered and mined in the Mosquito Range since the 1800s, according to Doyle.

"Maury Reiber, owner of many of the mining claims on Park County peaks, says there is no way to know where all the tunnels and prospect holes might be among the hundreds of claims on the mountains," Doyle said. "He can't emphasize enough the danger of wandering off approved trails, since he has found some of the tunnels or 'stopes' to be so near the surface that he can see the roots of the tundra grasses on the ceiling of the passageway."

Plans under way to ensure access involve creation of signage for trail identification. Volunteers — in particular, woodworkers — are needed to help

build the cedar and oak signs, Doyle said. Also needed are volunteers who could help post signs or rebuild trails.

Mapping and evaluation have begun through the efforts of the initiative, U.S. Forest Service, Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, Colorado Mountain Club and other interested groups, Doyle said.

In addition, the town of Alma has leased about 3,900 acres from mine owners to help eliminate liability concerns.

Three of the peaks may be open this fall, if signage is finished and private property owners have granted permission. Those would include: Democrat, Lincoln and Cameron. Access to Mount Bross has not yet been secured, Doyle said.

Once access to the peaks is possible, the public must still be aware that the mountains will never be available for "wide open" use. Staying on designated trails is critical.

"It's tempting to go wandering up there — it's so beautiful," Doyle said. "But accessing them must be considered a privilege, not a right. It could be revoked down the line, and people really need to understand that."

For more information about the initiative and volunteer opportunities visit: www.mrhi.org.