

Wilderness Fixed Anchor Chronology

The U.S. Forest Service has considered banning the use of fixed climbing safety anchors for more than a decade. This abbreviated chronology provides some background on the way this issue has unfolded.

In January of 1991, the Forest Service convened a National Task Group on Fixed Anchors in Wilderness to study the issue of managing fixed anchor use in wilderness areas throughout the country. While the task group issued a report in May of that year, the Forest Service never acted on these recommendations.

By June 1996 the agency issued an "Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" regarding establishing a national policy on fixed anchor use. This, too, was later pulled back due to strong opposition from climbers.

On June 1, 1998, the US Forest Service used a "discretionary review" of a wilderness plan ruling in Idaho's Sawtooth Wilderness to impose a ban on the use of fixed climbing anchors in all Forest Service-administered wildernesses in the United States. The ruling affected all forms of fixed anchors, including bolts, pitons, and nylon slings placed around rocks and trees. The ban meant that no new fixed anchors could be placed and existing fixed anchors were to be removed.

The AAC, working in concert with the Access Fund, regional climbing organizations, and other outdoor industry groups, fought the fixed anchor ban due to the threats it posed to climber safety. Then-AAC President Alison Osius wrote to Forest Service chief Mike Dombeck expressing concerns of the AAC. Several club officials also wrote opinion articles for major daily newspapers throughout the country, including the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Rocky Mountain News (Denver, Colo.), Denver Post, Portland Oregonian, Salt Lake Tribune and Seattle Times. Supportive editorials were printed by the Denver Post and Seattle Times.

Congressional supporters used the appropriations process to insert a "rider" that would have overturned the Forest Service ban and would have required that the agency use a formal public process to regulate the use of fixed climbing anchors in wilderness. Climbers subsequently pulled this rider once sufficient assurances were received from the Forest Service. Additionally, Senators Ron Wyden (D-Oregon), Richard Bryan (D-Nevada) and Harry Reid (D-Nevada) signed on to a letter from Senator Patty Murray (D-Washington) to Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck indicating their support for the use of fixed anchors in wilderness climbing. A similar letter to Dombeck organized by Representative Sam Farr (D-California) had more than 40 House co-signers.

In August of 1998, Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Jim Lyons announced that the Forest Service was staying the national ban for up to a year so that a negotiated rulemaking could occur with interested parties in hopes of reaching a compromise. The announcement meant that fixed anchors remained legal in all wilderness areas except the

Sawtooth Wilderness (where the original ruling was judged to be appropriate). The Chief's Office issued direction to the field, which indicated that no new rules regarding fixed climbing anchors were to be implemented until the negotiated rulemaking was completed.

In February of 1999, a Forest Service-hired facilitator issued a convening report that indicated enough consensus existed within the affected parties that a negotiated rulemaking may be useful to solve the problem. The AAC was one of 23 groups recommended for this panel.

In the period between the June 1998 fixed anchor ban and the start of the negotiated rulemaking process two years later, the AAC conducted a comprehensive review of the Wilderness Act of 1964, its legislative history and the historic use of fixed anchors for wilderness climbing. The AAC was able to conclusively document the widespread use of fixed anchors on Forest Service-administered wilderness areas prior to those areas being designated as wilderness.

The negotiated rulemaking committee had four two-day meetings during the summer of 2000. Though the negotiated rulemaking officially faltered when it was unable to reach unanimity on a proposed regulation, most members rallied around a principle of limited fixed anchor use in wilderness.

The Backcountry Management Plan for Rocky Mountain National Park modeled its fixed anchor regulations [link: [Fixed Anchors—Minimal Use Regulations.doc](#)] after the negotiated rulemaking approach.