

Early History of FENW and the VWR program

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After John Fayhee, his wife Gay, and photographer Mark Fox went on a backpacking trip in the Eagles Nest Wilderness with seasonal Wilderness rangers, Holly English and Katie Larson, John wrote an article for the Summit Daily News in 1994 noting (in Currie Craven's recollections) "disturbing trail conditions and a need for current, attractive signage which would impart necessary information to trail users." [from Currie's 2003 letter to Paul Semmer]. He suggested that local hikers come together to form a group to assist the Dillon Ranger District to meet the challenges he noted in his article.

The meeting of about 35 people created a steering committee to explore the creation of such an organization. Part-time Frisco resident, Frank Smith of the Galveston Bay Foundation, provided mentorship. Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness (FENW) was founded in May 1994 and received 501(c)(3) status in 1995. The four guiding principles chosen for the group were, and continue to be: Education, Outreach, Stewardship, and Advocacy. Ed Adams became President and Currie Craven became Chairman of the Board. FENW focused on the Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wildernesses in Summit County.

FENW worked closely with the USDA Forest Service (FS), especially the new East Zone Wilderness Manager, Beth Boyst. Dillon Ranger District, Holy Cross Ranger District, and Eagle Ranger District made up the East Zone. For the first 11 years, the group focused on stewardship and advocacy with some education in both Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wildernesses. Much effort was applied to various trail projects and hunter camp cleanups. Starting in 1996, FENW received grant monies from various towns and foundations to pay for and install Wilderness portal signs, trail junction signs, and trailhead bulletin boards with interpretive posters to educate visitors. To help understand Wilderness usage, FENW volunteers did social monitoring, which basically consisted of counting noses while they were out hiking and reporting the counts to the FS. For several years, FENW provided funding to DRD to pay for Wilderness Rangers' salaries during hunting season.

As an advocacy group, FENW participated in the White River National Forest Plan Revision, which was finally released in 2002. The group also participated in the development of the accompanying Travel Management Plan draft released in 2005. As far back as 2003, FENW was active with a coalition to promote several new Wildernesses in Colorado. The proposal was called the Citizens White River Proposal. And now in 2020, people are still working to create some of those proposed Wildernesses in the CORE Act sponsored by Rep. Joe Neguse and Sen. Michael Bennet.

Having completed the signage project, FENW looked for the next step in Education. The number of seasonal Wilderness rangers varied each year depending on the FS budget. In 2004, only two seasonal Wilderness Rangers covered three Wildernesses (including Holy

Cross). Even in good years, the rangers couldn't be everywhere at once and needed sleep and rest. FENW's Board had discussed creating a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger program to help. Visitors and locals didn't understand what Wilderness is or how to travel softly on the land to preserve its wild characteristics.

On the way back from the June 2003 Gateways (early June) trail clearing project cutting through fallen trees, Cyndi Koop said she would like to be a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger which I had thought about myself. Jimmy Gaudry, lead Wilderness Ranger, was with us and listened to our thoughts. The idea took flight. Beth Boyst came on board with the idea. We wrote a grant proposal for funding to develop and implement the program in 2004.

Unfortunately we didn't get the Volunteer Wilderness Ranger funding for 2004, because the Buffalo Mountain project received most of the requested funding. A new, sustainable, and safer trail was constructed up Buffalo Mountain through a grant from State Trails/GOCO; the grant proposal gathered support from the Summit County community, including businesses and the Summit Fat Tire Society. Grants for the project were also received from The Summit Foundation and the Town of Silverthorne. The new trail was built by the FS trail crew, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, and FENW volunteers.

In 2004 FENW launched their website as well as celebrating its 10th anniversary and the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act.

In early 2004, Forest Service Chief Bosworth listed four threats to National Forest Lands, invasive species, unmanaged outdoor recreation, fire and fuel, and loss of open space. Beth Boyst asked the Board if we'd be willing to help eradicate noxious weeds in the Eagles Nest Wilderness while we had a chance. After discussing whether or not that fell into our mission, the Board decided to jump into noxious weed treatment. The plan became to raise funds to hire a certified noxious weed treatment specialist and to have volunteers identify and map areas with noxious weeds. Plus the VWRs could inventory campsites with the aim of rehabilitating some of them.

In 2004, Chief Bosworth also issued a 10-year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge which included: Successfully treating for noxious weeds/invasive plants; Implementing Wilderness education plans; Completing a recreation site inventory. Implementing a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger Program and a Noxious Weed Treatment program would help the FS achieve three of the chief's 10 challenges.

FENW received a grant from the National Forest Foundation to treat noxious weeds starting in 2005.

FENW received Volunteer Wilderness Ranger funding in 2005 from The Summit Foundation, Frisco, ABasin Employee Environmental Fund, and the National Forest Foundation. Beth Boyst and I worked closely together. We obtained similar volunteer program manuals from the San Juan Mountains Association, Mt. Adams Ranger District

in Oregon along with information from Poudre Wilderness Volunteers and Indian Peaks Wilderness Alliance. I developed, with lots of input from Beth, the FENW Volunteer Wilderness Steward program. Volunteers would contact Wilderness visitors, answer questions, make sure they understood regulations especially dogs on leash and LNT practices for camping and hiking, documenting noxious weed locations, and inventorying campsites. The first year (2005) 12 volunteers counted 1,175 visitors and contacted 806 of them in 35 days and 181 hours. Ten volunteers reported noxious weed locations and inventoried campsites. Total volunteer program hours were 393.

After the first successful year, Beth asked if we would expand the VWR program to Eagle County to help on the west side of Eagles Nest Wilderness and in Holy Cross Wilderness. The board agreed and recruiting began in Eagle County and continued in Summit County. In 2006, 31 volunteers in the 3 Wilderness areas and 2 counties saw 2,022 visitors and contacted 1,650 of them in 57 days and 628 hours. Of those contacted, 1,169 were in DRD and 481 were in HCRD. Ten volunteers inventoried campsites in 2 Wildernesses while 4 volunteers reported noxious weeds in Summit County. Total volunteer hours for 2006 was 1194.

For 2007, I only have the Eagle County numbers. Cyndi Koop kept track of the Summit County volunteers. Seventeen volunteers saw 1,530 visitors and contacted 1,266 of them over 50 days and 351 hours. Another 100 volunteer hours inventoried campsites in 3 areas and inventoried noxious weeds in 6 areas.

The Volunteer Wilderness Ranger program was off to a great start, helping the FS with visitor contact and resource inventories the first 3 years.

I left the program in 2008 and Cyndi Koop took my place. Ken Harper came on board sometime after that to help with the Eagle County volunteers.

Tidbits:

In 1997 FENW had 150 dues paying members.

From 1992-2002, the FS budget decreased by 52%.