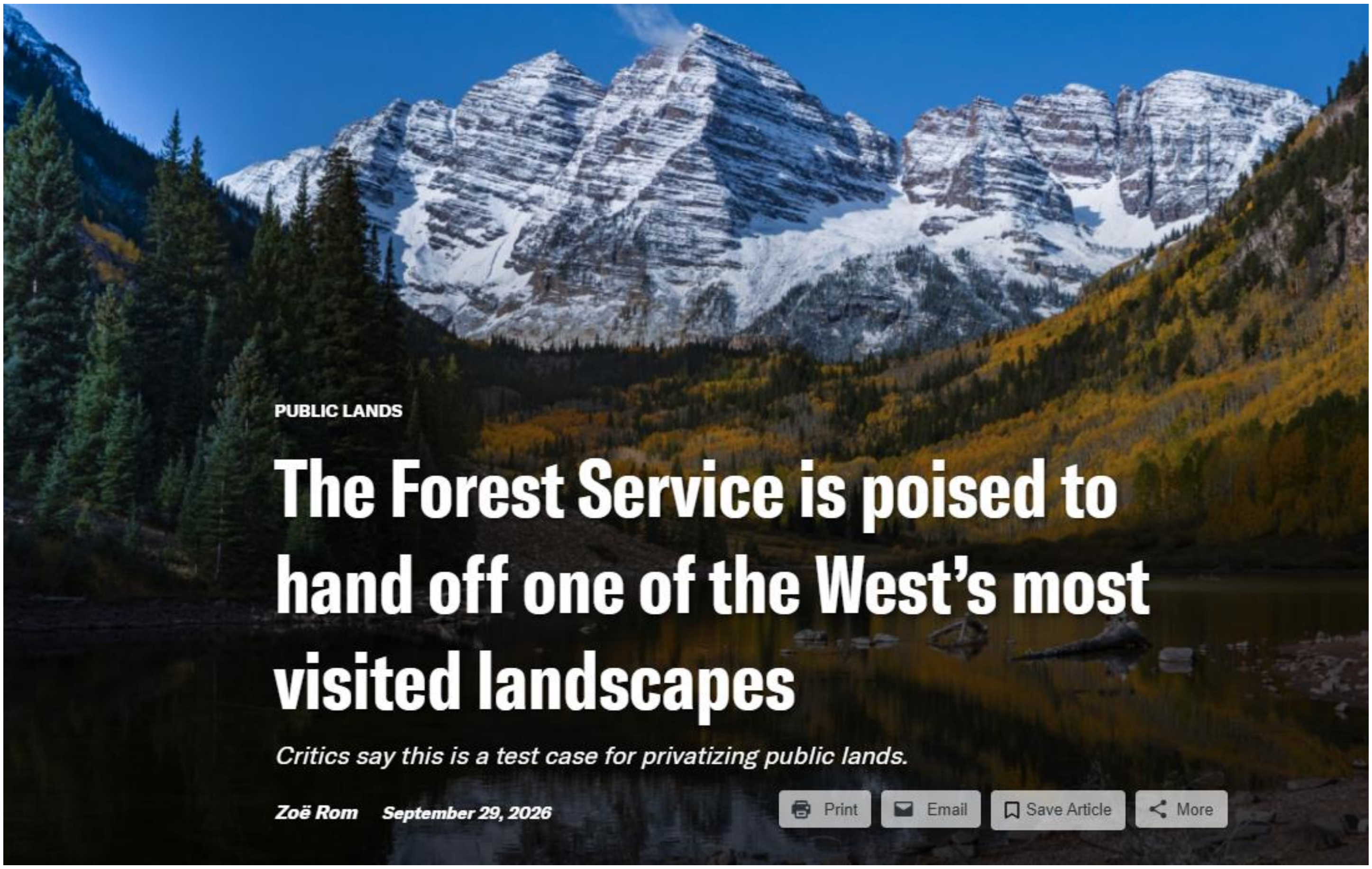

PUBLIC LANDS

The Forest Service is poised to hand off one of the West's most visited landscapes

Critics say this is a test case for privatizing public lands.

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The Maroon Bells, a beloved destination for hikers and sightseers in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, is changing management due to Forest Service budget cuts and staffing shortages, in a move that some worry might signal the first major domino to fall in the push to privatize public lands.

On Sept. 23, Pitkin County, Colorado, commissioners unanimously approved a special use permit to take over operation of the Maroon Bells Scenic Area. They also approved a new fund, raised from site fees, to cover maintenance and other costs associated with upkeep of the heavily trafficked area.

The scenic area, about 10 miles outside of Aspen, is the gateway to the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness in the White River National Forest, one of the nation's most visited national forests, which drew roughly 191,000 people between May and October last year.

The U.S. Forest Service currently manages the area but says it lacks the personnel and resources to do so properly. The agency lost almost 6,000 employees in 2025, and President Trump's proposed budget for fiscal year 2027 would slash its budget still further, cutting it by 75%. The White River National Forest has lost a third of its year-round staff since 2024, going from 169 to 111 employees, according to an analysis by Aspen Journalism. Its budget has been declining for over a decade, and Forest Supervisor Brian Glaspell says that Maroon Bells is running in the red by more than $300,000 a year.

In response, Pitkin County will take over management in 2027. Critics see this as a harbinger of further privatization; the Forest Service did not respond to requests for comment.

“This is the camel’s nose under the tent. The Trump administration wants to sell off lands wherever it can and privatize lands wherever it can’t. So this is the test case for privatization,” said Aaron Weiss, executive director of the Center for Western Priorities.

Roaring Fork Valley residents and organizations appear to support the county even as they criticize the conditions that forced the transfer. “The county is responding to unfortunate circumstances on behalf of our community,” said Will Roush, executive director of Wilderness Workshop, an environmental watchdog group based in the Roaring Fork. “The real tragedy is this administration’s failure to adequately invest in and staff our federal land-management agencies and the places that are so fundamental to our state’s identity.”

Budget cuts have led to deferred maintenance and repairs, and Pitkin County has already helped repair and reopen the area’s bathroom facilities and clean up mudslide debris, according to Gary Tennenbaum, director of Pitkin County Open Space and Trails. Tennenbaum dismissed concerns that the management transfer sets a worrisome precedent, noting that “the precedent has already been (set) that the federal government is not going to fund these things.”

The county is only taking over the designated scenic area, a small, developed site on the 2.3 million-acre forest that serves as the gateway to the roughly 181,000-acre Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. Exactly how many acres it will manage remains unknown, however, another point of contention. Pitkin County staff said that the importance of managing an iconic landscape outweighs privatization fears. “You got to find a way to manage the resources, because they’re too special to let go,” Tennenbaum said.

“The reality right now is our public lands are in trouble, and there are a lot of good counties out there that want to help,” he added.

According to Tennenbaum, the Forest Service had said that if the county couldn’t take over management, it would have to ask for bids from private concessionaires. Critics warned that under a private concessionaire, given the need to make a profit, access fees would likely increase even more than is expected under county management.

“The Trump administration is pulling a ‘That’s a nice mountain you got there, it would be a shame if something happened to it’ routine,” said Weiss.

IF THIS MANAGEMENT TRANSFER DOES SET A PRECEDENT, other problems may well arise. Pitkin County, home to popular ski destination Aspen, is relatively affluent. But many counties simply can’t afford to take over facility and land management and foot the bill for backlogged repairs and maintenance.

“A concession for Pitkin County is a slippery slope that could lead the Forest Service to pursue agreements like this in many other national forests with public and private parties that may not have the resources or commitment that Pitkin County brings to the table," Mark Squillace, a professor of natural resource law at the University of Colorado Law School, wrote in a Sept. 14 letter to county commissioners and the Forest Service.

The management transfer may be the first high-profile test of the Forest Service's new National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) rules, which, starting in April, allow public-lands agencies to approve this kind of action — called a categorical exclusion — without public input or a written finding. (After backlash, the Forest Service added a 15-day comment period that ends Oct. 9.)

Categorical exclusions have historically been used to fast-track lower-stakes decisions that don't merit public input — repainting buildings or closing roads during fire season, for example. This permits agencies to skip NEPA review on the grounds that the action in question won't significantly impact the environment. But Squillace says the use of exclusions stops far short of allowing transfer of management responsibility.

"The idea that the Forest Service can lawfully categorically exclude this proposal is laughable," said Squillace. In a written response, Glaspell said that issuing the permit isn't a "wholesale transfer" of management but rather "an authorization to conduct activities in a specified manner."

Weiss warned that transfers like this are increasingly likely to occur in states like Utah that have already signaled their willingness to privatize public lands. "If you can do that at the Maroon Bells, at one of the most iconic hikes in the state of Colorado," said Weiss, "why not anything else?"

This isn't the first time under-resourced federal land managers have sought to ease the strain on their personnel and finances, though it has likely drawn the most attention. In 2024, the Forest Service proposed a similar arrangement at Sweetwater Lake, also in the White River National Forest. The agency had proposed that the state take over and effectively manage the area as a state park. That deal transferred 840 acres to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the Forest Service committed to a full environmental impact statement with a public scoping period. The agency did not respond to requests for comment on how the two cases differ.

Critics also worry that the Maroon Bells handoff could enable fee increases levied by the county that sidestep federal processes. According to Squillace, the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act allows federal agencies to enter into concession contracts with third parties to provide services on public land, though agencies cannot delegate their management responsibility to those concessionaires.

"I am concerned that the line between providing services and exercising management responsibility is pretty thin," said Squillace.

Some public-lands advocates worry that these transfers open a sort of Pandora's box, where public recreation sites will be forced to cover their own costs, increasing incentives for resource extraction to maximize profits on federally managed lands. The Maroon Bells transfer, if approved, would lead to a price increase for vehicle entrance, season passes and camping, though Tennenbaum pointed out that prices have not changed since 1997, so the increase merely brings them in line with similar areas. The cost for vehicles will go from $10 to $30, and camping will rise from $15 to $33, though shuttle fares will stay the same. All the revenue will go into a dedicated fund to manage the area.

The Forest Service said it will consider public comments before signing the categorical exclusion. The permit will also still need final approval from the agency and the Department of Agriculture. If approved, Pitkin County will take over for the 2027 season on a five-year permit, renewable for five more.

“Hopefully, we can get a national reckoning, and we can get funding allocated to manage our public lands. Hopefully, that happens,” said Tennenbaum. “And we would happily give it back.”