

Lake County Visitor Impacts Focus Group & Online Survey Summary Report

Visitor Impacts Focus Group

On November 23rd, the CTO conducted a Visitor Impacts Focus Group for 13 Lake County public land agency stakeholders. Participants included: public land agency managers, visitor center managers, nonprofit conservation organizations that conduct trailwork, county emergency response management, and private entities that operate on public lands. Three questions were asked in a round-robin format. Below is a summary of results based on the raw notes.

During the summer and fall of 2020, did visitation increase, decrease or stay the same? If your revenue is impacted by visitation, did that go up, down or stay the same?

Visitation and revenue impacts were mixed due to the wide variety of stakeholders participating on the call. Land agency managers overwhelmingly saw an increase in visitation to public lands, including: trailheads, campgrounds and open spaces. Search and Rescue calls increased 200-300% compared to normal volume. Private businesses operating within public lands observed a mix in visitation and revenue due to COVID-19 adaptations with occupancy. Lake County visitor centers had a decrease in visitation and revenue, because of restricted hours due to COVID-19. Also notable, public land agency managers experienced flat or reduced staffing during a time period of unprecedented visitor use.

What type of visitor impacts did you observe during the summer and fall of 2020?

- Increase in new outdoor recreationists
- Increase in the number and size of dispersed camping sites
- Increase in human waste, trash and dog poop
- Congestion at trailhead parking lots
- New unauthorized trails and trail damage from OHV user group
- Trail widening and increase social trails from hikers
- Non-compliance with county and state campfire regulations and fire bans
- Search and Rescue calls increased 200-300% compared to normal volume
- Increase in user conflict
- Decrease in user experience
- Damage to campground infrastructure and USFS gates during Stay At Home order
- East side of Leadville which is mostly private land is seeing a lot of increased use by OHV and hikers with people going off trail onto private land and damaging fragile landscapes.

Do you have concerns about increased or additional visitor impacts in the coming years or a shift of impacts to other seasons that we typically have less visitation? (In addition, focus group participants discussed potential solutions and concerns.)

Future concerns:

- Lack of resources for management and enforcement, while visitor use will continue to rise. 40% decrease in funding per visitor in Lake County.
- New users for winter backcountry are a specific risk. How can we get the right educational message from the right people at the right time.
- Impacts or summer 2021 and expect that a lot of people that used the land for the first time want to come back to continue to appreciate public land.

Solutions discussion:

- Tourism stakeholders need to collaborate, get trained on visitor messaging and be well versed on the public land rules so they can relay them to visitors.
- Printed material on best practices to be shared at outdoor recreation businesses (RV dealers, REI).
- Create a trailhead ambassador program to educate visitors on the trail and trailhead.
- Utilize electronic signs that inform people about closures in campgrounds or the expectations for being on public land.
- Better adoption and use of COTREX app to provide more mobile offline mapping resources.
- Public-private partnerships for stewardship and education. For example, look at the Summit County approach to see what opportunities exist to learn from them. This includes having seasonal staff that work in dispersed recreational areas or partnerships with the Icelandic Ski Company to also patrol backcountry during the winter. They will be working with Friends of Twin Lakes below the dam to monitor and clean when needed and to put up educational signs and kiosks to set better expectations.

Visitor Impacts Online Survey

An online survey was available to 87 tourism-related businesses from December 4-16, 2020. Survey questions assessed visitor impacts as they relate to the organization/business as well as gaining feedback from their perspective as a resident of Lake County. Over the 13 days the survey was open, 18 individuals responded (20% of total contacted). The majority of businesses and organizations that participated in the survey are located in Leadville. Notably, businesses and organizations saw an increase in visitors, but revenue was flat or down compared to previous years. Many businesses did not see direct visitor impacts to their business, but they did experience visitor impacts as a resident. The most recorded impacts are: illegal camping, traffic congestion, and not complying to fire bans. Below is a summary of the results.

1. Where is your business or organization located?
 - Leadville - 77.8%
 - Twin Lakes - 16.7%
 - Outside town limits but within Lake County - 5.6%

2. Business or organization type:
 - Accommodations - 44.4%
 - Outdoor Recreation - 16.7%
 - Attractions (ex. museums) - 16.7%
 - Retail - 16.7%
 - Combination of accommodations and food/drink - 5.6%

3. During the summer and fall of 2020, what visitor impacts did you observe at your organization or business, if any? Please check all that apply.
 - No impact - 38.9%
 - Illegal campaign - 16.7%
 - Waste not properly disposed of - 16.7%
 - User conflict or decrease in user experience - 16.7%
 - Not complying with COVID-19 mandates - 11.1%
 - Overcrowding at business or attraction - 11.1%
 - Traffic issues - 11.1%
 - Drop of reservation - 5.6%
 - Less traffic in our business - 5.6%

4. During the summer and fall of 2020, did you see visitation at your organization or business:
 - Increased from previous years - 38.9%
 - Decreased from previous year - 33.3%
 - Stayed the same as previous years - 22.2%
 - Do not know - 5.6%

5. During the summer and fall of 2020, did you see revenue:
 - Stayed the same as previous years - 38.9%
 - Decreased from previous years - 38.9%
 - Increase from previous years - 16.7%
 - Do not know - 5.6%

6. Now let's evaluate impacts from your role as a resident in the community. During the summer and fall of 2020, did you observe visitation at attractions or areas that you personally frequent:
 - Increase from previous years - 44.4%
 - Varied based on location - 27.8%
 - Decreased from previous years - 16.7%

- Stayed the same as previous years - 11.1%
7. Again, let's evaluate impacts from your role as a resident in the community. During the summer and fall of 2020, what visitor impacts did you observe at attractions or areas that you personally frequent? Please check all that apply.
- Illegal camping - 44.4%
 - Traffic issues - 44.4%
 - Not complying with fire bans - 38.9%
 - Not complying with COVID-19 mandates - 33.3%
 - Trailhead parking overuse - 33.3%
 - Overcrowding at business or attraction - 27.8%
 - User conflict or decrease in user experience - 27.8%
 - No impact - 22.2%
 - Waste not properly disposed of - 22.2%
 - People not staying on trails or roads - 22.2%
8. As a business, organization or resident. Are you concerned about future visitor impacts?
- Yes, USFS not able to keep up with user demand
 - Overcrowding next to lakes and any open area where they could put up a tent or park, including semi-blocking roads
 - I encourage visitors to come to our location knowing Leadville is remote and provides a needed break from the large cities. The closing down of events affected reservations negatively.
 - I would like to see additional parking for Leadville visitors to park and walk.
 - Not really, with #s increasing & vaccines on the way I feel like we are close to getting more cooperation from the public & have more hope for containing it for the future.
 - 50/50 - Staying optimistic that we will regain our patrons and revenue.
 - No concerns
 - No