



Forest Service accepting comments on TSV plan

By Matthew van Buren

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The Forest Service has released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for proposed projects at Taos Ski Valley, which would include new glades, a mountain bike trail and lifts to the West Basin Ridge and Kachina Peak.

The EIS concerns Phase 1 projects of the Ski Valley's 2010 Master Development Plan, which replaced the 1981 plan. The Carson National Forest accepted the updated plan, which also includes an "adventure center," at the end of 2010.

"The draft EIS includes a discussion of the purpose and need for the proposed action, what issues were raised during scoping of the proposed action and the alternatives developed to address the issues," a Forest Service release states. "The document also analyzes and discloses the environmental effects of each alternative."

According to a Forest Service release about the Phase 1 projects, the proposed action, Alternative 2, would include new lifts and lift upgrades, two new gladed areas, a tubing facility, a snowshoe trail and a lift-served mountain bike trail that would be available during summer. Parking lots would be reconfigured, and a new drop-off area would be created to improve traffic flow.

The draft EIS states the proposed projects are necessary to counteract the steady decline in visits Taos Ski Valley (TSV) has seen over the last 20 years.

"Between 1990 and 2011, TSV's highest annual visitation was 364,000 in 1994/95," the draft EIS states. "Taos Ski Valley has not exceeded 300,000 annual visits since the 1997/98 season (300,264). In the 1990s, TSV averaged almost 295,000 annual visits. Between 2000 and 2011, TSV averaged approximately 224,000 annual visits, equating to a 25 percent drop in visitation between the two decades."

The draft EIS found that guests' expectations "continue to evolve" in the current market, and adding lift service to certain undeveloped terrain, more advanced intermediate terrain and more recreational opportunities can help TSV meet demand.

The draft EIS also notes the economic benefits the resort brings to the area, including generating business for hotels, restaurants, shops and others, as well as gross-receipts taxes for local government. The document states about 70 percent of overnight visitors to the Ski

Valley stay three or more nights in the area and spend an average of \$30 per day on food, \$45 per day on retail and shopping, and \$50 per day on lodging. The resort, which reports about \$14 million in annual gross sales, has an annual payroll of about \$6 million, employing about 350 full-time, seasonal staff and 70 full-time, year-round staff.

“Over the past two decades, the ski industry has witnessed a trend toward lift-serving high alpine terrain in response to growing customer demand,” the draft EIS states. “This trend has been fueled by evolutions in ski and snowboard technology, as well as skier/rider preferences for more adventurous and challenging terrain.” Carson National Forest spokeswoman Kathy DeLucas said her office has already started receiving comments about the draft EIS, and they tend to focus on the proposed lift additions.

“We’ve gotten about 25 letters so far, and most of them support the plan,” she said.

DeLucas said some commenters have strong opinions about the proposed Main Street Lift, which would provide chairlift service to Kachina Peak. She said some are in favor of the lift, while others want the Peak to remain hike-only.

“I think that’s where the big controversy is going to be,” she said.

According to the draft EIS, the Main Street Lift would serve about 77 acres of hike-to terrain on Kachina Peak, including Hunziker, Main Street and the K Chutes. It is estimated that only about 4 percent of visitors, or about 80 people, on an average weekend day hike to Kachina Peak, which tends to be open about 55-60 days during the season.

“Incorporating Kachina Peak into TSV’s lift-served terrain network (i.e., installing a fixed-grip quad with a capacity of 1,200 pph) would be anticipated to increase the number of days throughout the typical season in which Kachina Peak is open,” the draft EIS states.

The document notes that the top of the proposed Main Street Lift would be visible from the ridge between Wheeler Peak and Walter Peak, though not from Wheeler Peak itself.

DeLucas said the opposition has focused on the proposed Main Street Lift, rather than the proposed Ridge Lift, which would serve West Basin Ridge — also currently hike-to terrain. According to the draft EIS, the Ridge Lift would involve constructing an 800-foot, fixed-grip, triple chairlift with a capacity of about 1,200 people per hour. That lift would incorporate another 550 vertical feet, or 22 acres, of expert terrain into TSV’s lift network and trail system.

The draft EIS does note that, even after construction of the two proposed lifts, “the existing hiking routes would be maintained for those who value the sense of accomplishment and vigor associated with the hike itself.”

According to the document, under Alternative 2, the preferred alternative, 48 percent of current hike-to terrain, or about 102 acres, would remain hike-to only.

Approximately 20 percent of guests are estimated to hike along West Basin or the Highline ridges, and most do not go farther on Highline Ridge than Cabin Chute.

Signs, ropes and fencing would ensure some popular terrain along Highline Ridge, including Cabin Chute, Cabin Tresckow, Ni-os Heroes, Lift Shack Chute and Twin Trees Chute, remains

hike-to only.

“In order to preserve the hiketo experience along Highline Ridge, TSV would prohibit skiers and riders who utilize the Main Street Lift from descending further to the north than K1,” the draft EIS states.

Alternative 2 also involves creating the Minnesotas Glades (about 40 acres near Lift 7) and Wild West Glades (about 32 acres accessible from the proposed Ridge Lift), and replacing lifts 4, 5 and 7. A snowtubing center would be built near Lift 3, and an Adventure Center and 2-mile-long snowshoeing trail system would be created, as would 3.6 miles of lift-served mountain bike trails.

The draft EIS proposes mitigation measures to address impacts to air quality, wildlife, vegetation and other resources, which are anticipated to be minimal under Alternative 2.

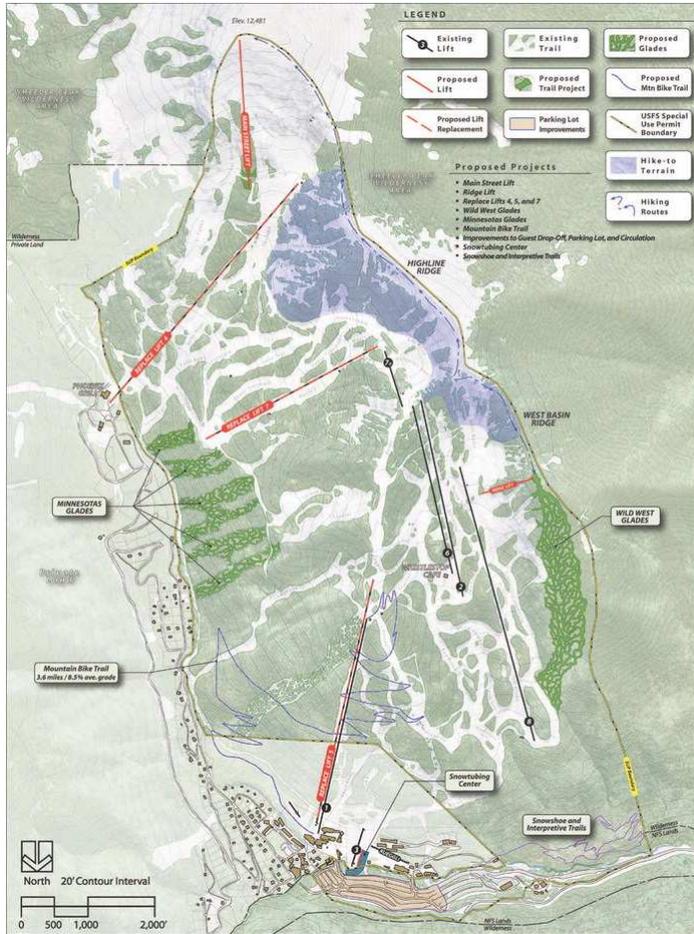
A third alternative is also considered. Alternative 3 does not include the Main Street Lift, the Ridge Lift, a proposed East drop-off area, the Snowtubing Center or reconfiguring the parking lot. However, according to the document, Alternative 3 would not be expected to “make TSV competitive again, to regain its share of the winter sports market, or to ultimately allow TSV to maintain its viability as a provider of high-quality recreational opportunities on the Carson (National Forest).”

Taos Ski Valley marketing manager Adriana Blake said the Ski Valley generally doesn't get feedback until the end of the process, when it will be told whether it will be able to move ahead with the proposed projects.

The draft EIS can be viewed in its entirety at http://a123.g.akamai.net/7/123/11558/abc123/forestservic.download.akamai.com/11558/www/nepa/74063_FSPLT2_074282.pdf.

The Forest Service has scheduled two open houses: One will be held Feb. 14, from 2-5 p.m., at the Looking Glass in the Resort Center at Taos Ski Valley, and another will be held Feb. 16, from 4-7 p.m., at R'o Grande Hall on Civic Plaza Drive in Taos.

Those who are interested have until Feb. 27 to submit comments on the draft EIS. They should include names and addresses and can be submitted to the Forest Supervisor, DEIS for Taos Ski Valley, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, NM, 87571. They may also be submitted by email to comments-southwestern-carson@fs.fed.us; those who email comments are asked to include “Taos Ski Valley DEIS” in the subject line. The office can be reached by phone at (575) 758-6200.

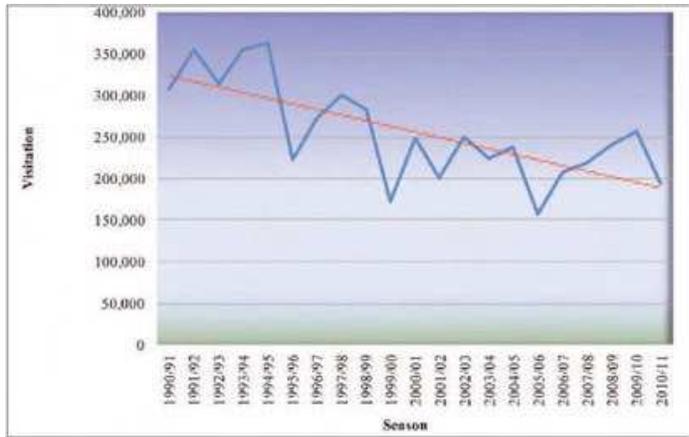


Source: Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Table 4. Annual Tacos Ski Valley skier/rider visits from 1991 to 2011

	Season	Annual Skier/Rider Visits	Annual Snowfall (in.)
1990s	1999/00	173,031	164
	1998/99	282,884	217
	1997/98	300,264	337
	1996/97	271,862	373
	1995/96	223,300	182
	1994/95	364,000	374
	1993/94	355,020	389
	1992/93	314,485	337
	1991/92	355,000	249
	1990/91	308,000	289
	<i>10-Year Average</i>	<i>294,785</i>	<i>291</i>

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