



Carson Forest gives TSV upgrade plan the go-ahead

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 9/6/2012

A record of decision approving projects Taos Ski Valley has proposed to attract more visitors has been signed.

According to a release from Carson National Forest, acting forest supervisor Diana Trujillo has signed the record of decision for projects proposed for Phase 1 of the ski area's 2010 Master Development Plan. The record of decision approves Alternative 2, the proposed action, which includes lift upgrades and installations, new gladed areas and a lift-served mountain bike trail, among other projects.

"I am confident that, collectively, the projects approved will help Taos Ski Valley to reclaim its competitive standing in the Rocky Mountain region," Trujillo is quoted as saying in a Forest Service announcement. "Taos Ski Valley is unique in the ski industry, where it is renowned for steep, adventurous terrain, and uncrowded slopes. The ski area's abundance of 'undeveloped' terrain has truly defined its niche in a competitive and constantly evolving ski industry."

According to information from the Forest Service, Taos Ski Valley operates under a special use permit issued by the Forest Service. The permit covers 1,268 acres of Carson National Forest's 270,000-acre Questa Ranger District, and the newly approved projects are all located within the 1,268-acre area or on lands owned by Taos Ski Valley. The record of decision takes into consideration recreational and economic benefits associated with Taos Ski Valley, as well as addressing the potential environmental and cultural impacts of the projects.

Taos Ski Valley Chief Operating Officer Gordon Briner said the Phase 1 projects will be great for Taos Ski Valley, the Taos area and even the state of New Mexico. "This process has taken just over two years," he said. "We're delighted to see that it's finally been approved."

Briner emphasized that the projects aim to increase visitor numbers in both the winter and summer seasons, which he called a "really healthy thing for all of us." He said lift-served mountain bike trails are expected to attract a substantial number of summer visitors to Taos Ski Valley.

"That's certainly our hope," he said.

Approved projects

According to information from the Forest Service, projects approved by the record of decision include:

- The installation of a Main Street Lift, which would provide chairlift service Kachina Peak. The lift would serve about 1,200 people per hour and incorporate approximately 1,100 vertical feet and 63 acres of expert terrain into the Ski Valley's lift network and trail system.

- The installation of a Ridge Lift, which would serve the West Basin. The lift would have a 1,200-person-per-hour capacity and would run from below the top of Lift 8 to the West Basin Ridge. It would incorporate approximately 550 vertical feet and 22 acres of existing expert terrain into the lift network and trail system.
- Upgrades to Lifts 4, 5 and 7 to reduce wait and ride times.
- Thinning to provide two new gladed areas — the Minnesota and Wild West glades — for intermediate-to-expert skiers. The Wild West Glades would comprise about 32 acres between the top of the West Basin Ridge and Lower Stauffenberg, while the creation of the Minnesota Glades would include thinning spruce-fir trees from a 40-acre area accessible from the bottom of Lift 7.
- Developing a four-lane snowtubing center on Strawberry Hill. Lanes will be 250-280 feet long, and a 250-foot-long carpet conveyor lift will take tubers to the top. A low-level lighting system will also be installed to allow Taos Ski Valley to offer snowtubing into the evening.
- Creating a snowshoeing “Adventure Center,” including a marked, interpretive trail system.
- Developing a mountain bike trail about 3.6 miles long and 24 inches wide, to run between the top of Lift 1 and the base area. The trail would have an average grade of 8.5 percent and was designed “to minimize the need for pedaling and braking to provide a fun experience for riders of intermediate ability levels.”
- Reconfiguring day parking lots and creating a new dropoff area on Thunderbird Road.

‘Really gratifying’

The Forest Service received more than 100 comments — both positive and negative — on its Draft Environmental Impact Statement, with many focusing on the proposed Main Street and Ridge lifts. Briner said many of the comments were “really gratifying.”

“We were quite pleased with the number of positive comments that were received,” he said.

However, some commenters argued that something of Taos Ski Valley’s character would be lost with the addition of the lifts. The record of decision notes that even with the addition of the two lifts, hiking routes would be maintained, and approximately 48 percent of the Ski Valley’s current hike-to terrain would remain hike-to only. According to the record of decision, the Main Street Lift would not run in the summer for public access.

“While I am aware my decision to approve the Main Street and Ridge Lifts will affect a portion of TSV’s guests who value the hike-to only experience, I am confident TSV — which has been owned by the Blake family since 1955 — understands both current trends in the ski industry and the needs/expectations of its clientele,” the record of decision states. “As previously mentioned, the ski industry is evolving, and TSV has been slow to keep up with current trends. In the same regard, I trust TSV understands its opportunities and constraints well enough to know if lift serving some of its renowned hike-to terrain is good for its recreational experience and business.”

According to the record of decision, thinning activities for the gladed areas are expected to occur “gradually over a five-year period, with small diameter dead and dying trees being removed first.” Most of the trees that will be removed will be smaller than 10 inches in diameter, and trees will be felled using chainsaws rather than heavy equipment.

“Within the gladed areas, thinning will not occur evenly,” the document states. “Trees and clumps of trees will be thinned to an average spacing of 20 to 60 feet, to create a skiable terrain between standing trees extending down the fall-line of the slope.”

Briner said the process so far has been a good one and included gathering lots of input from the public.

“The Taos Ski Valley staff did a tremendous job of working with the Forest Service to make this a reality,” he said.

Briner said, as a 45-day appeal period follows the release of the record of decision, and the Forest Service has another 45 days to respond to appeals, he doesn’t anticipate work beginning before this winter season. He said the projects have yet to be prioritized.

“We haven’t developed a timeline,” he said. “That’s our next step.”

The record of decision will be available online at www.fs.usda.gov/carson . Those who submitted comments during the draft environmental impact statement comment period may appeal the decision. Appeals can be emailed to appealssouthwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us or mailed to Deputy Regional Forester, Southwestern Region; Appeal Deciding Officer; 333 Broadway Blvd. SE, Albuquerque NM 87102.