

## **Forest Service receives three appeals of TSV project approval**

**By Matthew van Buren**

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Carson National Forest has received several appeals of its decision to approve several proposed projects at Taos Ski Valley. Acting forest supervisor Diana Trujillo signed a record of decision allowing Phase 1 projects under the Ski Valley's Master Development Plan to go forward. They include replacing several lifts, adding lifts to Kachina Peak and the West Basin, thinning about 72 acres for two new gladed areas, adding a lift-served mountain bike trail, developing a snow tubing center, constructing a snow shoeing "adventure center" and reconfiguring parking lots.

Concerns raised in the appeals ranged from larger crowd sizes to negative impacts on wildlife.

Taos Ski Valley's master development plan notes fluctuating annual visitation and the need to respond to consumers' demands with the addition of new lifts, "which are vitally important to meet customer expectations," among other measures. The plan also suggests developing additional activities to attract more guests in both winter and summer.

The Forest Service has responded to a number of comments that were made earlier in the process, and the record of decision approved the plans proposed by Taos Ski Valley.

Among the appeals the Forest Service received was one by "Carson Forest Watch," a Llano-based group organized by Joanie Berde. Berde's appeal focuses mainly on the area's wildlife and argues that the Forest Service failed to take the "hard look" at environmental impacts required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

"The (EIS and record of decision) fail to adequately analyze and disclose the cumulative effects of past development at TSV and adjacent areas, combined with current and future projected uses of this part of the Carson National Forest," Berde wrote.

Berde wrote that she worries future projects at the Ski Valley could "threaten the persistence of white-tailed ptarmigan, pine marten, boreal owl and Canada lynx in New Mexico." Her appeal argues that the Forest Service should have further considered the quality of adjacent habitat and the loss of habitat associated with climate change as part of its review of cumulative effects.

"(The record of decision and EIS) fail to address this important issue and how this project will only further threaten animals already under stress from a changing climate," Berde wrote.

She claims in her appeal that the Ski Valley area is the "last holdout" for a number of threatened species, including marten and ptarmigan.

“Surveys have found few of these species in other areas of Northern New Mexico or in the Carson National forest,” the appeal states.

Berde wrote and that bringing more people to Kachina Peak and the West Basin ridge, constructing new lifts and removing trees “will further fragment and degrade this fragile area.” She argues that the approval of Phase 1 projects “effectively opens the door” for future phases, as well, which should also be addressed.

According to a Forest Service response to a similar concern raised earlier, future projects would have to undergo “site specific” analyses. Remaining projects from the Master Development Plan include a “Summit Lift,” which would take skiers from the base to the top of Lift 2, a new beginner area on private land, a new restaurant at the top of Lift 2 and “miscellaneous trail improvements and construction.”

Patrick Grace, of El Prado, also submitted an appeal, writing that he believes “the Kachina and West Basin lifts are a bad idea on many different levels,” including the “visual impact” a lift to Kachina Peak would have. He argues in his appeal that bighorn sheep could be negatively impacted, as well.

“The installation of the West Basin chair, in my opinion, is only aesthetically a bad idea,” the appeal states. “As an active skier at TSV, I see that the increased traffic in the West Basin will result in more injuries and a generally more impacted experience in that area.”

Grace asks that the Forest Service not “overlook the responsibilities and duties as the stewards of our common lands to maintain what we as a collective community consider our birthright and inheritance of our children.”

“The decisions you make today for the economic good of the few can rob our future generations their sanctuary from an increasingly modernizing and mechanical world,” he wrote. “It can rob them of their actual identity through their connection with the real world (the mountain wilderness).”

The third appeal came from Emily Sadow, of El Prado. She wrote that she is “dumbfounded” that the approval was signed by an “interim” supervisor, and that the decision “should be made by someone who (has been) the supervisor for years.” In her appeal, she also argues that the proposed projects could have a “huge impact” on the watershed and that the visual impacts of the projects would harm the area’s “wilderness characteristics.”

Grace and Sadow both wrote that they fear the addition of the lifts would lead to “open gates” into adjacent public lands. Grace wrote that it is “almost a given” that the ski area would petition for access into the “side country.” He wrote that “there are about a dozen of us that are consistently active in the wilderness” and that the “wilderness experience” would be negatively impacted if the proposed projects are allowed to go forward.

“I know this is all speculation, but when you give an inch, they tend to take a yard or so,” Grace wrote.

The EIS, dated Aug. 2012, does attempt to address most of the concerns raised in the appeals. The chosen alternative “is not expected to produce negative impacts to any of the analyzed federally or state-listed species,” the EIS states, specifically listing species including the

American marten, bighorn sheep, Canada lynx, white-tailed ptarmigan and boreal owl. Thinning would be done in a mosaic pattern, according to the EIS. It suggests taking mitigating actions, including surveying areas prior to glading and leaving downed logs and lower branches in place when possible.

“Keeping lower branches will provide habitat security for Canada lynx, snowshoe hare and American marten,” it states.

Regarding concerns about out-of-bounds skiing, the Forest Service’s response in the EIS states that boundary management is an “operational issue and is the responsibility of TSV” and that the boundary would continue to be roped and signed.

A Carson National Forest representative declined to comment on the appeals, stating that the regional office will provide a decision around late November.

Taos Ski Valley Chief Operating Officer Gordon Briner said he has read the appeals and that Ski Valley leaders believe the EIS addresses the concerns raised “in a pretty thorough way,” though they are appreciative of a “healthy” appeals process.

Regarding concerns about “open gates,” Briner said that issue should be separated from the addition of lifts. He said the idea of opening gates has been discussed for “over 15 years,” but that it wouldn’t be predicated upon the construction of new lifts.

“We have not made a decision to proceed with that ... It’s certainly not a new concept,” he said. “If we thought gates were a great idea today, we could go to the Forest Service today to talk about that.”

Briner said the Ski Valley is waiting for the Forest Service to respond to the appeals before prioritizing projects and developing timelines. The Ski Valley’s “preferred alternative,” according to the EIS, would take place over 5-10 years.

For more information, visit [www.fs.usda.gov/carson](http://www.fs.usda.gov/carson) .

